The Novels of Richard Pryce

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The Statue in the Wood

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By Richard Pryce

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THE STATUE IN THE WOOD

THE FIRST BOOK

THE STATUE IN THE WOOD

BOOK THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

On a day of late spring or early summer, when the world was younger by some years, a lady of considerable charm, and of an appearance that demands the word 'fashionable' for its adequate or even natural qualification, was walking through a wood.

She was not dressed in such a way as a woman of these days would have been dressed for a country walk. She wore, it is probable, many more clothes. She wore silks, moreover; laces. There were forget-me-nots in her hat. She carried a parasol that was somehow elaborate, and she opened and shut it — actions which involved many others — rather frequently. The wood was hers, but she had an air of exploring it. The spirit of discreet adventure was, indeed, so apparent in her looks and her movements, that the observer — if there had been an observer — must have been very dull to whom it would not have been manifest that the winding path she trod, even as the impulse, probably, which had prompted her pursuit of it, was wholly new to her. Her steps

were tentative as the steps of one unsure of his ground, but purposeful as those of a pioneer. She looked about her as she walked and stopped often to examine, or perhaps to pick, a flower; or when a branch which must be manipulated blocked her way; or to disentangle a twig or a bramble from skirts which were doing their best, but were wholly unsuitable to their present occupation and environment. As most of these actions entailed the closing of the parasol, which she never failed subsequently to reopen, her progress, whatever her pace, was not quick. She had long hours before her. She was, indeed, in no hurry.

The day was one of exceeding beauty; the wood, sparse where she walked, but thickening on each side of her, was of a beauty that was vaguely, but palpably also, exciting. Spring had merged into summer, but was present still in the anemones and the wild hyacinths at her feet, and in the love-songs of the birds. Every now and then she heard the note of the cuckoo. This will-o'-the-wisp of sounds she could not locate; could not even tell of it sometimes from which direction it came to her. It had its part in the beauty of the day. It was of a piece with the tender green of the leaves. It was of a piece with something that stirred in herself. It had been the note of the cuckoo — another one probably, but possibly even the same, heard from the terrace as she waited for three o'clock and the carriage — that had, as she would have said, 'unsettled' her. The

carriage had come round as the hour struck. She had sent it away.

Hark! There it was . . . and there . . . cuckoo, cuckoo, . . . sweetest (in some sort), as it was most elusive, of all the songs of love! Sweet as love itself, cruel, too, as love, if you associated it with the relentless ways of the singer. Wonderful song — if you could call that a song which had but two notes to its sweet interval — wonderful, seductive, merciless. Briefest of all love's songs — brief as love. Very symbol, then, of love's rapture and anguish, of the surpassing, because the passing, ecstasies of love. Sound calculated to disturb you, indeed, if you were thirty, and a woman, — lonely, moreover, without kith or kin to make claim on your affections, — and knew that, with rings on your fingers and bells on your toes, with possessions, that is, houses and lands and menservants and maidservants, carriages and horses, and much else, in modest proportions, perhaps, as possessions go, but proportions more than sufficient to your needs, — you had hitherto somehow missed, or been missed by, the one possession of all. Cuckoo . . . cuckoo . . . the disturbance, whatever its nature, was divine.

But if she had an air of exploring she had also an air of seeking. She came to a bridle path which cut the wood obliquely, and was plainly uncertain whether to pursue her way as before or to take one

of the alternative routes which now offered themselves to her. The straight cuttings, clearer of undergrowth, appealed to her tried clothes — to the parasol which would not there have to be furled and unfurled as on the straggling path she had followed. But she liked her straggling path, liked, too, because they were unfamiliar, the little inconveniences to which it put her, and which pointed the adventure of the day. She looked right, she looked left: green glades; shadowed. Ahead, the broken, sun-flecked wilderness with its diversions and its obstacles. The charted, the uncharted ways . . . which? She chose — with a vague feeling, perhaps, that what she sought was secret and would be approached, other things being equal, by less rather than more defined ways — the uncharted. She would, as it were, stumble upon what she was seeking. That was her feeling. That was, moreover, in her mood of the strange day, her hope — her wish even.

She knew suddenly that she was enjoying herself greatly. The smell of the woods in her nostrils was like some delicate savour on the palate. She could distinguish some of the ingredients in the *pot-pourri* of sweet scents. Sweet-briar at a point was unexpectedly one of them, and she looked about her seeking the source of a fragrance that she connected only with cultivated land. Yes, here was sweet-briar. She plucked a leaf and held it to her

nose, inhaling deeply. Smell of the taste of the apple of your dreams! The apple of the poet's dream — of the Song of Solomon — the apple of solace. Or Eve's apple — the Forbidden? Either. It was an apple with a taste like the fragrance of sweet-briar that the singer of the Song of Songs had in his mind, she was sure. It was an apple with a taste sharp and sweet, like the biting-sweet fragrance of sweet-briar, in which the white teeth of Eve met crisply as the morsel slipped pricking into her watering mouth. Where, she thought, as she breathed in the pungent essence and smiled happily to herself, where, in these days, was to be found such an apple as that?

And now the wood thickened. The path which she thought of as uncharted, because, in comparison with the formal cutting of the others, it was so ill-defined, became obscure and obscurer still. Presently, was this a path at all? Had she lost that semblance of a path which had guided her steps hitherto? And at what moment? The wood had become a maze. Was she, too, lost?

She had closed her parasol. Here in the thickness of the wood she had no need for it. She was in a green twilight — the twilight of many trees. Not the religious care of the most delicate complexion in the world would demand the use of a sunshade here. The wood was its own sunshade and hers.

The ground was now a little damp. Soft mosses carpeted its unevennesses. Little fleckings of sunlight dappled or damascened them with gold. Where such a filtering of light struck the bark of a tree a snail, it chanced, had left a glittering, glistening trail. She took notice of such small things as might serve her for landmarks, if, presently, she should find that she was, indeed, lost. She should, like the children in the fairy story, have brought white pebbles with her to strew as she walked.

Silence now. In the heart of the wood no birds sang. Yet comparative silence only — or silence which was not silence at all, but a thing made up of innumerable small sounds. In it she heard her own footsteps, the cracking of twigs under her feet, the rustling of leaves as her skirts brushed them, the silken rustle of her skirts themselves. These sounds were magnified. Crackle, crackle, swish, swish: they pointed her loneliness.

She stood still to listen, and they ceased. The wood, nay, the world, seemed to her empty. Did no one use the wood? Were there no cottages in it or on the outskirts of it? Was there no right of way through its leafy fastnesses? It was her own wood, but she did not know. She knew the keeper's house, because a road which she often took upon her drives led you to that. But that was not here. She knew — as Lady Bountiful rather than châtelaine — the cottages of many of the workmen on the estate,

woodmen, hedgers and ditchers, and the like. But not any of these were in the neighbourhood in which she now found herself. Found herself? Found? That was not quite the word. That was not the word at all. No human habitations were here. No footfall but her own broke, or seemed like to break, the silence. She was alone in the wood. She was — but very delightfully, very excitingly — lost. It had wanted but this, she thought, to complete her adventure.

Well, whatever happened, she had only to walk long enough in any direction to come out — somewhere.

It was as she stood hesitating that she heard, suddenly and just ahead of her, the voice of the deceiver. She started at the sound and moved forward. The tangle of the wood was thickest here. Things that had been cut had grown up. A bramble caught her dress and tore it. She freed herself with difficulty. But to do so she had to take off her gloves, and the bramble, baulked of its prey, revenged itself. When at length she was really free, not one only of the hands sparkling with their many rings was bleeding, but both of them.

Should she have taken warning and turned back? She was half minded to turn, but the thing which had barred her progress, now swaying like the sword that turned this way and that, guarding Eden, blocked her retreat. Besides, under her momentary

misgiving, she knew that she meant to go on. Deep down in her heart she knew . . . and just then, close, close at hand, the cuckoo's voice again calling, calling . . .

The bramble, disregarded, swayed to stillness.

CHAPTER II

THE clearing, cut as it seemed in the very heart of the wood, was as an island — an island set in a sea of leaves. Out of this sea, after battlement with its leafy waves, she suddenly emerged. It was like getting to land. That was why she thought of the clearing as an island.

She was a little breathless now. In her excitement she forgot the smarting of her hands till she saw that two large drops had gathered, one on each. Her handkerchief — a filmy thing of gossamer — was tucked, luckily, into the bodice of her dress; thus she was able to make use of it, and with its aid, after a patient minute or two during which the beads formed and re-formed, to stanch the minute crimson flows which threatened damage to her silks and laces. By the sight of the crimson stains upon the white she was reminded again of a fairy story. It wanted but the black of ebony for the infant of the queen's desire to be conjured up before her. Snow, ebony, and blood — it was to be compact of these, was it not, the child of the young queen's dreams?

She did not follow up the thought. It was, indeed, hardly a thought. It lay only behind her other thoughts — under the excitement which held her and which caused her heart to beat and her eyes consciously to shine. She stepped into the open.

The statue stood in the exact centre of the clearing, which was a circle. From this circle four paths, cut in the wood, radiated like the spokes of a wheel. Three of them she found later were dummies — blind alleys leading nowhither. The fourth led into the bridle path which she had passed upon her way. This fourth, faced by the statue which looked down the long, narrow length of it, was the approach proper to the circle, and on each side of it was a stone seat. In the mouth of each of the other three, using it, indeed, as the niche which in point of fact it was, stood a terminal.

Why had she never been here before? — hardly even known of it? Only to chance words, the expansive excuse of a new maid the evening before, did she owe a realization of its existence.

"Lost ourselves in the wood, 'm, me and Alice, on our walk, being strange both of us to the country after London. Or else I see now I ought to have waited for one of the others as did know her way, but being Alice's afternoon out and she wanting to see it too . . ."

"Very well, Branton, very well, don't let it occur again."

"No, 'm, indeed. Nor it would n't have occurred now, except for the difficulty of finding it — being hidden like. Sort of secret as they all said of it. I 'm sure I 'm very sorry. When I saw the time I said to Alice, 'Whatever will my lady say and company

to dinner and me with her hair to dress and not so much as a pair of stockings laid out on the bed!'"

'Hidden like.' 'Secret as they all said of it.' Hidden. Secret. And, 'They said of it.' They talked of it, then? Dim memories had stirred as she submitted herself to the competent hands of the belated maid. What was it? What was this spot that they talked of — that newcomers wanted to see? She did not remember that her husband had ever spoken of it to her. But she had heard passing allusions to it. A guest had spoken of it, or one of the tenants, or some one in the village. It belonged in a way to the youth of her husband — to the long, strange bachelor days of the old man whom she had married, but whom, in the nine years of her married life, she had never known. Oh, yes, she had heard of it — vaguely even formed a conception of it, so that, from time to time, she had said to herself that some day she must see it. But that day, till this day, had never come. They were comparatively little at Redmayne. There was the house in Curzon Street. There was Clanguthrie, which her husband had bought for the fishing and which she later had sold. And, for the last eighteen months of her husband's life, there had been the fruitless chase of lost health, abroad. Since his death, two years ago, this was the first occasion on which she had made a stay of any length in her country home.

So had it come that she had not seen it, and so, for the very indefiniteness of her knowledge of it,

had it come also that, at the back of her mind, mystery all unconsciously had already associated itself with what her eyes were now beholding for the first time.

Her eyes? More than her eyes. Yes, more, certainly, than her eyes. All her senses seemed to be implicated in the feelings she was experiencing. Was there, indeed, some magic in the spot — in the circle itself, in the grouping of the three satyrs round the statue? Benevolent satyrs, as she saw when she came to examine them. No, it was not evil that was in this place. But something was in it. It was as if, as she stepped into the circle, she had come into the range of a spell or an enchantment, or, more aptly, perhaps, within the radius of activities and of influences which elsewhere had been impotent, or, at all events, undiscernible. Once over the border, an invisible philtre had been put to her lips, invisible hands ministering, and she had drunk! The mystic fumes of the potion had mounted, were mounting, not obscuring her thoughts, or confusing them, but rather clearing them, causing them to be crystal clear so that her mind rejoiced in itself, as, suddenly, she knew that her body, under the ridiculous trappings of ridiculous clothes, felt itself to be rejoicing. She had never before been so acutely conscious of herself. She had a sense of herself as the mother, her child at the breast, has sense of herself; or as a child of itself when, rosy, healthy, new-wakened,

perhaps, from sleep, it watches intently, curiously, the movements of the dimpled hands and feet which it has come gradually to recognize as under its own control.

What was this place? What did it signify? To what god was it consecrated? What the mystic incense which went up from its unseen altars?

She had been standing just within the circle where she had emerged from the wood. Now she moved forward — tentatively, deprecatingly even, as if, despite the welcome which the place had given her, and of the sincerity of which she could have no doubt, she yet felt that she was in some sort a trespasser here, or at most a guest, who, privileged, perhaps, must yet go warily. Her hosts here were as the shy, friendly, unknowable things of the fields and the woods. Their confidence had to be justified. They were elusive; they were unaccountable; they could be — it seemed a disloyalty to know it howsoever deep in your heart! — even treacherous. But if they really trusted you they liked you.

Let us watch her, as they perhaps watched her — if they had any existence outside her imagination and our own! She was tall for those days; beautifully made, one could see, and might further guess, under the protuberances and redundancies of the absurd yet becoming clothes. She looked less incongruous than might be supposed, for the fashions

of the early seventies echoed grotesquely some of those of eighteenth-century France, and the spirit of the place was the spirit of the *Fêtes Galantes* and the *Fêtes Champêtres* of the court painters. Just such a setting as this of the clearing in the wood, with its statue and its three smiling satyrs, and its carved stone seats with the crumbling rams' heads and garlands of flowers, have the dallyings of their lords and ladies. Her incongruities were for the wood; here, making the tour of the circle and pausing before each of the terminals as she came to it, she fitted into the picture, and by her polite artificialities even completed it. One might see her, then, as a symbol of that which directly enough, at the time when such pictures were painted, had been making for destruction and the horrors of the guillotine! One might see her thus, if one chose so to see her, and, dismissing her, miss her altogether. The seeds of rebellion were in herself. They put forth their first shoots, perhaps, as we watch her.

Wonder was in her eyes. She, like the benevolent satyrs, was smiling. Her smile was lit at theirs maybe. They smiled down on her, yet smiled past her at — or, as it were, to — the statue. They might have been pointing her to the statue, or pointing the statue to her. "Turn," they may have been saying to her. "Turn. See what is behind you." She had an air of saying to them — through her smile, perhaps, using it as a vehicle for those words she did not speak — that she would not turn yet. It was

evident that she did not mean to turn — to let herself turn — yet. Or they may have been saying to the statue, "Turn, you. See what has come into the circle . . ."

The statue did not make sign or answer. He had waited. He could wait.

Yes, it must have been deliberately that she did not turn. Each of the satyrs had her attention. She pulled the strangling bindweed from about the throat of one; using a bit of stick, cleared the dirt of years from the graven features of another; unbound the eyes of the third, which ivy, partially blinding, threatened to blind completely. She ministered to each.

The wood was encroaching everywhere — reclaiming as a possession what had been reclaimed from itself. The deep niches — paths as and though they appeared to be — were choked with branches and undergrowth; the path, down which the statue looked, choked too. There was a straggle and a tangle of undergrowth in the clearing. What had been turf, maybe, in its day, was now a jungle of weeds and tall grasses. Hemlock was here and campion, ragwort and briony, sorrel, wild garlic. There were brambles, too (sweet-briar amongst them — again sweet-briar), which caught at her skirts, like the brambles in the thicknesses of the wood itself. Little trees had planted themselves. Some day, the wood had promised itself, there should be nothing but the overgrown carved stone

to show that a clearing had ever been here at all. Circle, statues, seats, all were to have been swallowed up in the green sea of leaves.

She had left the third satyr now — him of the half-bandaged eyes which she had set free — and threaded her way to the opening of the path between the two stone seats. She examined each of these before she turned. They were both flaky, weather-stained, battered, but their carvings were fine and were little broken. They had come from Italy, it was probable. She swept the litter of sticks and leaves and refuse of the wood from them, and ran her fingers over the garlands caressingly. She appeared to minister to the carved seats as she had ministered to the carved satyrs. She looked as a woman looks when she is visiting a grave that has been long neglected and does it what little temporary services are in her power. Was she, perhaps, visiting a grave? Was this spot the strange memorial of her strange husband? It was, as she had supposed, closely associated with him. It was, perhaps, his most fitting monument. But you do not visit graves with joy, with softly flushed cheeks, with excitement, an adventurous air.

She turned slowly. She was standing now in the exact middle of the path which faced the statue.

Afterwards she asked herself whether any of the events of that afternoon had happened at all? Did the place itself exist? Was the whole thing, her pil-

grimage, the walk through the wood, the swaying briar barring her way, the sudden clearing, the stone seats, the three guardian satyrs, the very statue — was this, were these a dream? If so, who should tell her the interpretation of it?

No dream. Did she not in her mind's eye already see the place swept and garnished? Not altered. Not a thing should be, as we say, touched! But (like the neglected grave, perhaps) the spot should be cleared, cleaned, set in order. Would turf flourish in the heart of a wood, so nearly under trees? No dream, you see, when she could busy her mind with such thoughts and intentions. She had a dozen projects.

Yet, so passing strange it all seemed when she looked back! What had possessed her? Not that she regretted. The experience had been wonderful, awakening. Had the statue really the qualities with which she had accredited it? Only thus could she account . . .

A sitting figure of a youth — a slave, perhaps — leaning slightly forward, his legs drawn up, the left foot advanced a little beyond the other, the hands clasped lightly round the right knee. That was all. But — for her as she had seen it in those strange moments of clear sight — that does not begin to tell of the beauty which the unknown sculptor had found in the pose and captured in the enduring marble. What in the pose? What of haunt-

ing, hurting, loveliness? Calm was there, patience, knowledge, but under these, and yet somehow informing them, something which she could not define — something which may have made for knowledge, but did not make for peace. It was as if on the calm of the relaxed limbs and the steadfast patience of the waiting features the sculptor had left record of his own unrest. Across the centuries he had sent his message, and she, Philistine as she was and even knew herself to be, had somehow received, nay, been able to receive, it. She had a sudden inkling of what the search for beauty might mean and as immediate a knowledge that nowhere is it written that those who hunger and thirst after beauty shall be filled. With her joy in the unknown artist's work was a stab at her heart for his wounds. Only out of his suffering could this joy which she felt in the contemplation of his achievement have come to her. The joy had increased as she looked. Presently his suffering did not matter. There are persons in whom the ecstasy produced by the contemplation of beauty holds elements of despair. She was not of those. She could look and rejoice — exult. She was absolved by her very Philistinism from participation in any artist's pain — as completely, perhaps, as the youth who had sat for this one and whose form and features had been destined to transmit his message. But the message had its part, too, in affecting her. Pity was transmuted to a baser emotion. A momentary jealousy stirred in her.

She need not have been jealous. The artist, giving, breathing life into dead stone, had robbed her of nothing. The emotion was not prolonged. It passed, indeed, in a sharp pang that was like the stab at her heart which had preceded it, and she was in key again with the smiling day and the smiling place. Even the youth seemed to smile in his calm. She could have fancied that his smile was for her — that he had been waiting for her, looking always down the long, narrow avenue, telling himself that one day, one day — she would come . . .

Eleven years fell from her as she stood there. She was nineteen again. He was her own age — a year older, perhaps — yes, twenty. A year older that he might have the male's rightful authority. She had married at nineteen the courtly, polished, handsome old man who had been her husband but not her mate. Old? Nineteen calls sixty old. Why had she married him? Five out of ten of the girls she knew would have married him; more: not one, perhaps, of her bridesmaids but envied her her grey-haired, upright bridegroom. He was like something fashioned of steel — as burnished, as cold. Was he cold?

No matter. He was old and youth goes to youth. If she had known! She did know suddenly. Her pulses were again the pulses of a girl. Her skin the fine rose-petal skin of a young girl. A flush was on her cheeks. Her eyes were shining.

She moved forward like one sleep-walking and laid her face against the stone face. Youth to youth. The stone, on which the sun had been shining, was warm.

Her eyes filled with tears.

CHAPTER III

SOMETHING had happened to Ann Forrester the day she walked in the wood. She went out one woman, she came back another. So, at least, it seemed to herself. It surprised her that others did not appear to notice any change — anything different even in her aspect. She half believed herself to have been, and still, in some sort, to be, bewitched. How else could she explain her amazing conduct? What she had done was so unlike her. Never in her life had she yielded to strange impulses. It might almost be said that never in her life had strange impulses beset her. Orthodox was a word of those days: she was orthodox.

Yet the change which she was conscious of in herself she did not wholly deprecate. She had been bound; she was free. Impossible not to experience some relief at deliverance even from restraints imperfectly realized. Was she free? She could only have said that she felt herself free. Had there been restraints? If not, why this sense of freedom? Which was only to argue in a circle as Branton her maid might have argued, or Mrs. Piper in the housekeeper's room.

She certainly saw things newly. Her boudoir — which she even called her boudoir — suddenly displeased her. She had been delighted with it up to

then, secretly preferring it to the beautiful Adam drawing-room which she had always found too austere for her taste. Now she saw her own satin-panelled room as vulgar. All that she had admired in it lost its charm. There was too much of everything; too much blue satin, too many sunk buttons in the elaborate upholstery of chairs and sofas, too much gold, too many curves, too many photographs and photograph frames. There was a portrait in crayons on porcelain of herself which had been her special pleasure — in evening dress, a fan, a bouquet, white kid gloves. As strange an impulse, surely, as that to which she had so strangely yielded in the wood, sent her hand to the china knob of the bell beside the fireplace.

A footman answered her ring.

"Ask Mrs. Piper to be good enough to come to me."

Mrs. Piper appeared in the course of a few minutes.

But Mrs. Piper found her in what is known as a brown study.

"You wished to speak to me, 'm."

"Oh, Mrs. Piper?" she said. She seemed to have forgotten what she had to say. "Oh, yes, to be sure."

Mrs. Piper, all shining alpaca and chenille, waited.

"Yes, 'm?" But there was no answer.

Mrs. Piper coughed discreetly; coughed respectfully. Summer and winter Mrs. Piper had a cough. She might be said to keep one as people keep pets.

You asked after it, and not so much asked after it as asked for it. "Your cough, Mrs. Piper?" — as who should say, "Your dear cough, — are we not to have the pleasure . . . ?"

But Mrs. Forrester on this occasion forgot Mrs. Piper's cough. When she collected herself it was to say again, "Oh, yes, to be sure," and once more to pause.

She withdrew her eyes from the housekeeper and ran them around the room. They came to a halt at the porcelain portrait on the console table between the windows.

She had found that she did not know quite how to say that she wanted to get rid of the portrait by giving it to Mrs. Piper, for the housekeeper's room.

"Oh," she said, "I was wondering whether — whether you would care to have this, Mrs. Piper?"

"That, 'm!"

Mrs. Piper's tone expressed her pleased astonishment.

"Your beautiful likeness in the crayongs, 'm, — on porcelain!"

"Yes — on porcelain," Mrs. Forrester said. She closed on the word "porcelain" as if it held for herself all that she wanted to express. "If you think you would like it for your room. You have the engraving of Mr. Forrester and I thought, perhaps . . ."

Mrs. Piper forgot her cough — forgot even that her mistress had neglected to ask for it.

"But so beautiful, 'm. With gloves and fan. I should know it for your ivory with the chicken skin anywhere, 'm. And the bouquet, so natural. It's too good for downstairs, 'm. It is, indeed, One of the loveliest things in this lovely room. For myself, 'm? To keep, as it were? Do you really mean it?"

"I thought, perhaps, it would go on the mantelpiece — or anywhere else, of course, that you liked."

"I shall *treasure* it, 'm."

Mrs. Forrester took it from the table, looked at it, and put it into her hands. Mrs. Piper bowed over it, renewed her raptures, and withdrew.

"Now, what's she done that for?" was her unspoken comment when she had closed the door behind her.

All the rest of that day Ann Forrester was what the novelists of the seventies — the writers of the books which she read — called *distraite*. The fashion was still for French words then. Men were *distingués*, women *élégantes*. Ann Forrester, *élégante* beyond dispute, was *distraite* also — qualified, as we see, for a heroine's part in any one of their novels.

One of the effects of the absence of mind that now seized her was that, with the gift to Mrs. Piper, her designs upon the decorations of the room which she had seen newly and which had displeased her, seemed to have spent themselves. She had had

vague intentions of beginning the work of demolishment at once. She did nothing more — did not move a single photograph frame, or sweep away one of the objects which crowded the tables and the shelves and tops of the cabinets. She stood for some time looking out of the window with shining eyes that did not register any conscious impression of what they rested on, and then sat for as long in one of the satin-covered chairs and dreamed. She still felt light as air, still felt as if heavy shackles had been struck off her limbs. A smile played round her lips.

Mrs. Piper, like her namesake Peter of the Pickled Peppers, proceeded in the housekeeper's room to do things with a P. She put the portrait on the piano and pondered. The piano had itself once graced the boudoir. So had the curtains of heavy faded brocade. So had the pierced steel fender. So had the two slender screens which had given place to the two worked satin banners hanging by an elaborate arrangement of folding gilt rods from the mantelpiece. In many instances, if boudoir and housekeeper's room could have known it, it was the housekeeper's room that scored. But neither knew it — each blinded hitherto by the ephemeral fashion of the day. Mrs. Piper could understand the discarding of the piano, for the piano was admittedly outworn. She could understand the faded curtains finding their way to her; the fender — since brass was so much handsomer than mere steel; the screens, because

she thought the adjustable blue satin banners, with their gilt rods and their silken tassels, so exquisite. But the portrait on porcelain — to come back to the P's — there Mrs. Piper pronounced herself puzzled.

We may leave the good lady puzzled, and, closing behind us at the top of the back stairs the green baize door which divided the servants' quarters from the rest of the house, return to her mistress. We find her still dreaming.

To her there entered Whipple the butler to tell her that Mr. Coram was in the library and would like to speak to her.

"Very well. I'll be with Mr. Coram in a moment."

Mr. Coram was the land-agent. The day of the week was Tuesday. Friday was the day when she glanced over his accounts, heard his reports, settled what works or repairs were to be done on the estate, which of the tenants' requests or grievances were reasonable and which were negligible, signed the cheques for wages and so on, and saw generally to the affairs of her property. Half an hour's work on Friday morning completed the business arrangements for the week. It was in no sense indispensable, since it only took place when she was at Redmayne and she was so often away. She enjoyed this half-hour, however, and had got into the way of looking forward to it. Mr. Coram, whom she was very careful to call Mr. Coram, but whom she thought of sometimes by the Christian name by which, as a friend

of his father's, her husband had been accustomed often to address him, and always to speak of him, was a young man with whom most men and all women liked to come in contact. "Timothy has a head on his shoulders," Mr. Forrester used to say, and probably saw quite as well as the women that Timothy had shoulders, to say nothing of a magnificent throat, to carry the head on. Brains appealed to Mr. Forrester and — witness, perhaps, his beautiful wife — not brains only. Timothy Coram was in two senses a man of parts.

"What does he want?" was Ann Forrester's thought, as, nothing loath, she went her way to the library.

It seemed that she was not to know. Twice lately in the middle of the week Mr. Coram had come to see her upon matters which, when she had examined them, she found could have waited till Friday. What he said that he wanted, now, was to know whether Williams at the Home Farm was or was not to be allowed a rebate for which from time to time he put in certain pleas. The matter was in no way urgent.

Mr. Coram, looking magnificent in his leggings and his old rough tweed suit, gave as his reason for troubling her that he had met Williams that morning and, after listening to him, had promised to see what Mrs. Forrester had to say. It was very pleasant to hear what Mr. Coram had to say in that pleasant, deep voice of his. When she found that

he was for refusing, she heard herself whimsically championing her tenant's cause for the pleasure of hearing him demolish her arguments.

"Williams is as able to pay his way as you are," he said. "He just sees a chance of saving a bit. If by working on your sympathies he can keep in his own pocket what ought to go into yours he is n't above doing it. Not that I've a word to say against him. He's quite a decent old chap. He's just a bit of an old soldier."

"But if he's a decent old soldier."

She had two ideas: one that he had already refused Williams's request — as she was quite sure in her own mind, despite her words, that it ought to be refused; the other, that Williams was an excuse. He had not come to talk to her about Williams at all. Williams was the cover under which he approached her.

Why?

As she looked at him, pondering rather the question which she asked herself than the question which he professed to ask, he began to fidget a little. She had always known, without, as we say, thinking about it, that this big young man was shy.

"I shall tell Williams you won't hear of it," he said jerkily.

Ann Forrester smiled.

"I believe you have told him," she said.

There was a moment's pause.

"Well, practically I have," he admitted.

"Then that's all?" said Ann.

The room was lined with books and had the pleasant smell of books. Behind her preoccupation with Mr. Timothy Coram and what had brought him, Ann Forrester, fresh from her criticisms of her boudoir, had a new consciousness of how beautiful the room was, and how pleasant were its influences. It was in the winter, perhaps, and on a winter evening especially, when the heavy curtains were drawn and a fire burned in the grate, that the room was at its best. But it was beautiful at all times. Books and bronzes — what better decorations for a room? Her eyes rested absently on one of the bronzes. It was as if, taking them for granted, she had seen none of these things before.

If Mr. Coram had come to say anything particular he did not say it. He picked up his hat and his driving-gloves. He was going. She had a vague wish to delay him, but found no adequate reason, and let him go.

Well, that, as she had said, was all. But was it? It was a still more *distraite* lady who went for her drive that afternoon.

Bewitched! There was no other word for it. Bewitched from the moment when she had listened to the cuckoo and started for her fateful walk! She had not been thinking of love. She did not know that she had thought of love since the death of her husband. She did not know that she had thought much about love during his life. No roving eye

hers. She was not sure even that there had not been times when she had supposed that what she felt for him was love — times, that is, when the love at which she merely guessed, and which (in such moments of guessing) she knew herself to have missed, seemed to have place only in the imagination of the poets and novelists who thus, inventing it to begin with, exploited it, used it as part of their stock in trade, and imposed it upon the imaginations of their readers. She had started for her walk normal, cool, poised, a woman of sound common sense, with, as she would have said, no nonsense about her, nor, as she would have thought, any special susceptibility to vapours, whimsies, megrims, any of those or kindred weaknesses. She had come back — well, as we have seen. She started for her drive in that curious state of abstraction which had held and was holding her so strangely, but heart-whole she would have affirmed, protested, sworn if need be; she came back from it the captive and the victim of love. She came back over head and ears in love with the magnificent Timothy Coram.

CHAPTER IV

In after years when Ann Forrester looked back she knew that what had seemed so sudden had been long preparing. Examined, perhaps no mental crises are really sudden. Manifestations as sudden as you like; processes for the most part gradual. This had been gradual. She had taken Timothy Coram for granted as she had taken the bronzes for granted in the library — yes, and the library itself in which the bronzes stood; but Timothy Coram had been there urging his way gently into her life, as the bronzes had been there educating her eye, and it had needed but some such experience as she had been through to enable her to realize him. She saw him newly; saw him as if she had been seeing him for the first time, and knew that in gaining this fresh vision of him she was relinquishing the old, and with it her peace of mind.

The servants noticed her abstraction. Mrs. Piper showed the portrait with some pride. *She* had noticed nothing, she said. Nothing so very unusual in a gift to her was her argument. Wool-gathering? She had seen nothing of the sort. 'Mrs. Piper, I should like to make you a little present' — that was her version of what Mrs. Forrester had said to her in the boudoir — as a token of esteem, of course,

clearly implied. She chose to forget that she had had to cough before her presence was perceived, chose to forget her 'Now, what's she done that for?' outside the door. But absence of mind? No hint or sign of any such thing to the best of Mrs. Piper's knowledge. 'I want to make you a little present. Let me have the pleasure of asking your acceptance of this.'

Branton, however, told of a very preoccupied lady, to whom you had to put every question twice, and who did not appear to notice what she wore.

"'Oh, anything, Branton,' she says, 'yes, that'll do nicely,' and could n't have told that from t'other it's my belief when she had got it on — as I let her, though it was n't what I'd meant her to wear and only herself for dinner. Quite unlike herself, *I* thought, though I did keep me thoughts to me own mind and pass no remarks — quite and altogether unlike herself."

Whipple told of a lady who practically ate nothing, well, nothing to speak of, at dinner — *or* luncheon for that matter.

Did n't seem to care where she drove either, Charles, who had been out with the carriage, corroborated. "'Anywhere. About an hour and a half, tell Fenton.' And came back like one in a dream. Seemed quite surprised like when we got home and I let down the steps for her. Sort of 'Oh-do-I-get-out-here?' 'Is-this-where-I-live?' sort of. 'Is the drive over?'"

"Such stuff!" said Mrs. Piper, and went back to her room.

But Branton hoped her lady was not sickening for anything. Just the way illnesses began — an all-overish feeling, crinklings down the spine of the back, and lucky if you were n't in a burning fever by morning.

"For two pins I'd have taken upon meself to feel her pulse and advise bed."

So they talked. Let no one on this side of the green baize door suppose that his or her moods escape comment on the other.

Ann Forrester, happy and unhappy, shed a few tears in the night. On the whole she was happy, as why should she not be, with everything, as she might have supposed, to bestow? Had she not also the silent implication of those apparently purposeless visits to draw upon for solace if doubt should beset her? Unquestionable that the gentleman had made excuses to see her. What had he to say? What, when it came to the point? She was soon to know.

The next morning told her. She was arranging flowers in the morning-room — or more accurately trying to bring her wandering thoughts to bear upon the arranging of flowers, a great sheaf of which had just been sent in from the gardens — when Whipple came to tell her that Mr. Coram was in the library.

"Tell Mr. Coram," she said, using almost the

same words as before, — "tell Mr. Coram I 'll be with him in a moment."

But this time she did not follow the servant at once. She needed the moment she had spoken of in which to calm herself and to steady her nerves. Her heart was beating so violently that she could not immediately have trusted her voice, or even trusted her cheeks, to which, when she was alone, and though she was alone, the treacherous colour mounted like the colour of a child. She had been longing to see him and shrank from seeing him. All love's paradoxes and contradictions were there.

Yet, when at length she was ready, it was to all appearance a normal Ann Forrester who came to the young man in the library. She held out her hand, smiling. His covering clasp of it caused the calmness of her eyes to falter for a second or two, but, afterwards, she had the satisfaction of knowing that from first to last she had betrayed no sign of her inward perturbation. He, on the other hand, was quite plainly embarrassed.

She waited for what he had to say. He had seen Williams and had convinced him that the rebate he asked for was, as he had told him, quite out of the question. Williams had hummed and hawed, of course; had not accepted the decision without some attempt at argument. Twinton, of the White House Farm, and Acland, of the Red Bank, had both had their rents lowered — an old grievance. That might be, but what about the new outbuildings which

Williams had asked for two years back and which had been conceded?

Ann Forrester waited — smiling even. All this, she knew well, was but to make a short story long, for in his good-tempered way (to which they all responded) he listened to no nonsense from the tenants. He dealt with them easily because, as they knew in their hearts, he dealt with them very justly. None of this was what he had come to say. So she waited, considering even, now that she had control of herself, whether she should help him.

He stopped suddenly in the middle of a sentence. Perhaps he realized her smile and interpreted it.

"No," he said, as if answering her thought, "this is n't what I have to say. I hardly know how to begin."

Ann looked at him. Her face did not betray her. She was sure of herself now.

"Oh," she said in a matter-of-fact tone, "you know me well enough, surely, Mr. Coram, to say anything to me that you may have to say."

"Yes," he said, "that's true. It does n't, all the same, make this easy. I've tried more than once and failed — gone away, I mean, without saying what I wanted to say."

"I know," Ann heard herself saying.

"Well, it's got to be said now." He paused. "What I've been trying to tell you," he said, "is that I want — no, that's not it — that I have decided that I — I must go."

"Give up the agency?"

He nodded.

What she had expected to hear she did not know. The consternation which she felt, but which she contrived not to show, was evidence, to herself, of how unprepared she had been to hear this. There had always been Mr. Coram, first as pupil to the former agent who had retired in course of time, and then as himself with one assistant pupil of his own. She had taken him for granted more completely even than she had known.

She found herself listening to his reasons, and trying to understand them. He was telling her that he wanted to travel, see the East, see the world. He had always wanted to travel. Yes, she remembered that he had often spoken of that wish. Well, he was thirty-two now, and since the death of an uncle some ten months back — a death by which she remembered to have heard that he benefited — he had found himself likely to be in a position some day to follow his inclination. The settlement of his uncle's affairs had shown them to be in a more prosperous condition than he had dared at first to hope. His future was, thus, modestly assured. If he was to travel at all the time seemed to be now. Everything was in order, Bulkley, his pupil, a good man, as she knew, competent, trustworthy, thoroughly conversant with the business of the estate, ready, if need be, to step into his shoes. All that seemed to hinder now was his own reluctance to sever his

connection with Redmayne, where he had spent so many happy years, and where he had met with such unfailing kindness.

Ann Forrester heard him out. He spoke quickly and yet with difficulty — eagerly like a boy asking leave, urging reasons as pleas, pleas as reasons, but diffidently also and with effort. Again she had sense of the room which, associated now in her mind with the weekly half-hours that had imperceptibly become a rhythmic pleasure in her life, now seemed to exist but as a background for her relations with him. What would the room look like empty of him? — no, not empty of him (for so little was he there!), but unexpectant of him, not waiting for him as a certainty once a week at least, and no longer liable to receive him at odd moments! What would it look like ten or twenty minutes hence even, when their present talk should have ended, and, with the knowledge that all their talks were now numbered, she should have seen him go?

There was silence for only a few moments when he had spoken, and then Ann said: —

"Well, I don't pretend that I shan't be very sorry to lose you. Things have gone very smoothly — much more smoothly here, I gather, than with our neighbours, and that, I know, is thanks to you. Then at Redmayne we all look upon you as a friend. Oh, many reasons why we shall miss you! But, of course, we must n't stand in your way."

Conventional? Impersonal? Stilted even? It had

to be these. Only thus, mistress of herself as she was, could she trust herself to speak at all.

She was standing she perceived suddenly: and he also was standing. In his nervousness for what he had to say he had prefaced his first words to her — all those irrelevancies about Williams and the rebate — with an 'I shan't keep you a moment.' It was this, perhaps, which, giving the interview an air of transitoriness, had kept both of them unconsciously on their feet.

Ann sat down now at the table at which they were accustomed to sit, and after a moment or two Mr. Coram followed her example. They sat facing each other across the table. Only that there were no cheques to sign, no accounts to look over, they might have met for the weekly business.

"When do you want to go?" she asked. It was, indeed, grasping her nettle.

"I want to talk to you about that — consult you. I don't want to do anything that would in any remotest way be inconvenient to you. I hate the idea of going. It's a wrench. One puts out roots, I find. The very land holds one — the soil." ('Only the land?' thought Ann as she listened — 'only the soil?') "I shall hate to leave my little house. I sit looking at the crooked floors and the beams. Hate to think of any one else in it — even Bulkley if he should take my place and move into it. I believe I'm homesick for it already." He broke off.

"You're not in a hurry to go, then?" Ann said,

venturing. But as she saw his face she knew that for all his reluctance he did wish to go soon.

"No," he said, "not in a hurry. I want to meet your convenience. That's the first consideration — comes truly . . . you will believe this? . . . before anything else."

"Yes," Ann said, "I will believe that."

Yet the words hurt her. 'Convenience,' 'consideration.' She was not alone in falling short of the personal note!

"About — about when do you think?" she asked him.

But that was what he wanted her to tell him.

"It depends," he said, "upon what you decide — whether you let Bulkley replace me or whether you would like to look out for some one else."

Ann felt that Mr. Bulkley would do as well as another. If Mr. Coram went, she felt just then, it mattered little to her who stepped into his shoes. Mr. Bulkley — she liked him well enough — knew the tenants, knew the place, knew his work. She would, also, still have, in Mr. Coram's pupil and understudy, a man who was a gentleman to manage her affairs. Oh, yes, Mr. Bulkley as well as another.

"He would be willing, I suppose?"

"Not much doubt about that. I have n't asked him, of course. I could n't till I had spoken to you. It is time, really, that he was working on his own account. He certainly knows all I can teach him."

"He could begin, then, at any moment?" Ann forced herself to ask.

"Oh, yes. As far as qualifications go he's ready this minute."

She would spare herself no pain. She leaned forward a little.

"When do you really want to go, Mr. Coram?"

"I have said. When it suits you, Mrs. Forrester."

"If I said that must be when you like?"

"I think I should be very sorry to hear you say that."

"Why?"

"Because that would settle it."

She waited, her heart beating faster. For a new thought had come to her. Could it be . . . ?

He would surely but the more want to stay. Yet his embarrassment, which was so unlike what was to be expected of him, his obvious reluctance — had he not said (nay, had she not seen?) that he had tried before this to bring himself to the point of speaking and had failed? At the least he was torn in two directions. Could it be that he did not want to go at all, but felt that he must? If, without wanting to go, he felt that he must go, there could be but one reason. Could it be that?

She felt suddenly that she did not know men — that in all her life she had not known them: their seeming simplicity, so much more baffling than all the complexity — and even subtlety! — of women! You did, after all, know where you were with

women because their subtleness was inherent, admitted, to be reckoned with. Men were different. For their very serenity you could not know them.

He was speaking. Sustaining or shattering her sudden hope? She did not know.

"It's that I feel I must go. I don't want to, but I must. It's in my blood somehow — stronger than I. And it's also that whenever I do go it will be a wrench."

"You would like to go soon?"

"If I had only myself to consider."

"Leave me out of this," Ann said steadily.

"You mean Bulkley might take up the work?"

Ann nodded.

"I could n't go with an easy mind if I thought that the place would suffer. With Bulkley here I should know that it would n't."

"Well," Ann said, "I am quite willing that it should be Mr. Bulkley. I would rather not have any one that I did not know. If he's willing, as you think, we can look upon that matter as settled. Now, Mr. Coram, you are free to go when you like, or stay as long as you like."

There. She had said it. It was for him now to speak or be silent — give or withhold a sign. Was any forthcoming? She could not tell. He seemed at once sorry and relieved. Well, he might conceivably be both, and still be actuated by such motives as she had dared to hope were constraining him. He had already said he would be sorry to hear he

might go when he pleased. She was, as we should say in the slang of these days, no for'arder.

He was thanking her now — thanking her for what he had said he would be sorry to be granted. Oh, — let her not deceive herself! — one only asked for what one really wanted.

"I can't say how kind I think it is of you. I should never be able to tell you how much I have appreciated your kindness to me always."

"But you want to go," Ann was thinking. "You want to go."

Yes. It was plain that he wanted to go. She leaned back in her chair. The interview was over.

CHAPTER V

WHEN he had left her, blankness descended upon her like a cloud. For some moments she could not think; then once more her mind began to work.

Here, then, as she had foreseen it, was the room empty, but with an emptiness foreshadowing the permanent emptiness that was to be. What did it feel like — look like? Her eyes, raking it, searched it for him. There he had sat — the chair still askew as he had left it when he got up. His arms had rested on the table while he talked. She remembered that he had played with the pen-tray in front of him, and that at one moment he had broken the point of one of the sharpened pencils which lay in it. She had often watched those strong hands of his sharpening a pencil. They performed actions requiring delicacy as well and as easily as those which made demands upon their muscles. How did she know that? Sharpening a pencil meticulously was nothing. How did she know that the strong fingers could do delicate things? In so many and even in such unusual guises could she visualize him, now, that the answer could only be that there had never been a time when she had not been conscious — nay, acutely conscious — of him. She could see him tying a fly, for instance, though it is improbable that she had often seen him so employed. It was natural that

she should be able to see him riding, driving, breaking in a horse, for these, with every sort of outdoor pursuit and occupation, were part of his life. Thus it was that horses and dogs and guns associated themselves most readily with him in those pictures which, bidden and unbidden, rose before her. But there were less usual aspects in which she could see him very clearly also, and it was those that showed her how closely she must have observed him. Yes, very, very conscious of him under an unexplained unconsciousness of herself! She filled the empty room with visions . . .

Then — strange anomaly! — the days, leaden hours composing them, took to themselves wings. She did not know how to get through each day for the burden of it, and yet day after day slipped from her. How could that which seemed so unbearably long pass so quickly? For she knew that each day as it went diminished a tale of days that, perhaps suddenly, would show itself from the first to have been very meagre. She knew that he meant to go soon. Visits, from time to time, to London, told her that he was making his arrangements, seeing to his outfit, settling his affairs. He meant to cut himself adrift for a time from the land of his birth. He wanted to be free to go where he liked. He had few ties. He was seeing to it, she believed, that when he went he should have none.

He talked to her sometimes of his plans and she

listened. She gave no sign of the feelings that held her. Her control of herself sometimes surprised her. She could smile as she listened.

"You think all this childish," he said one day. He had been speaking of places he wanted to see — places as far apart as Ceylon, say, and Alaska, or the West Indies and Yokohama.

"No," she said, "I don't think it childish."

She was really thinking it boyish — adorably boyish! and worshipping the boy that she saw in him.

"I was thinking that I rather envied you," she added after a moment's pause.

They were walking in the garden. Full summer now — June, the month that Ann Forrester generally spent in London. She knew why she was not in London this season. Time enough for London. Time enough for London when a desolate Redmayne would not be able to hold her. She thought of the busy life of the season without regret.

"You see I've seen nothing," he said. "I start fair."

He made it so plain to her that he must go. It was on her tongue to say, "Don't say it again. I have accepted your reasons. You tell me you must go and you are going. I am standing aside." But what she did say was that she could understand his wish to travel; and, even as she spoke, her heart, for her momentary rebellion, melted towards him. He was at once man and boy. But he was wholly male — probably, therefore, not very comprehending —

and it was this which she found so baffling. Impossible to know or to read him.

There was little going on in the country just then — nothing to divert her incessant thoughts. Most of the big houses in the neighbourhood were shut up, their owners or occupants in London. She had dined out once or twice rather dismally; made an effort and had a few people to dinner. But she was only really alive when, as now, she was seeing him, or when she knew that she was soon to see him.

"Have you heard again from your friend?"

He was waiting, she had learnt, — but only learnt lately, — to know whether a friend would be able to go with him. The friend's name was Masterton, but because upon the movement of this friend depended his movements, she could not bring herself to speak it.

"I'm to hear this week," he said.

That was her doom. She knew it. The friend would be able to go with him. How could the friend hesitate? How could one so blessed hesitate? To be singled out and not to know! If such a chance had come to her? Yes, to the end of the world, she thought. To the edge of the world, she thought . . . and over . . . perhaps over . . .

Presently she learnt that the friend had decided to go. The date was all that remained now to be settled. The week had passed and it had not been settled, but everything was ready. The delay had

something to do with stocks and shares, she gathered. The friend (whom she wanted to hear nothing about) was waiting for a favourable moment to realize and so raise the money. He would telegraph. Telegraph! How Ann hated the friend!

Then, when the tension and the resultant strain were most atrocious, when Ann was most at the mercy of her heart and her nerves, news came to her that a friend of her own, one Claudia Nanson, was back from a prolonged sojourn in India, whither her marriage had taken her, and whence her sudden widowhood had sent her home to England. Claudia Nanson had always understood her. Claudia Nanson must come to her at Redmayne. She wrote to her without delay and received an answer almost by return of post. Claudia Nanson was coming to her.

She waited with eagerness for the day of her arrival and drove to Whitcombe to meet her. She reached the station ten minutes before the train was due, but her impatience took her from the carriage to the platform. There had been a shower and the sun was shining on the wet platforms and drying them almost visibly. Everything that could shine seemed to be shining — the tarpaulins over some trucks in a siding, the stacked coal in the yard on the other side of it, the telegraph wires, and notably the double set of lines which looked like silver in their exceeding brightness. Ann's spirits began to rise.

The train at length came into sight. Presently Ann was welcoming her friend.

The two ladies declared (and may have thought) each other quite unchanged by the years which had gone over their heads since last they met. Widows wore weeds in those days and Claudia's weeds were voluminous and very becoming. She contrived a few very pretty tears at the meeting, — tears that shone like the effects of the recent shower and were quite as evanescent, — and remembered from time to time to show a suitable melancholy; but five minutes had not passed before Ann knew that she was not inconsolable, and ten had not passed before she knew further that she was enjoying her freedom, that she had entered, indeed, into a very delightful rest.

"Dear Claudia," Ann said then, "it is so good to see you again."

"Dearest Ann," said Mrs. Nanson, "outside my own family there is no one else in the world that I could have brought myself to stay with in these sad early days. You are so helpful and understanding."

"We have both been through sorrow," Ann said.

Neither was conscious of any insincerity, though each read the other. Friendship cemented itself afresh between them.

Mrs. Nanson put up her veil once more. She had raised it on her arrival to kiss and be kissed and show the pretty tears, but had lowered it almost immediately.

"England!" she said, now, "England!"

"Yes!" Ann said. She had been right. Claudia would not fail her.

"England!" Claudia said again.

"Even after the East?"

"Because of the East," said Claudia.

She breathed in deeply the fresh, rain-washed air. Perhaps you used all the obvious similes then. She did not say that it was like champagne, but she did say that it was like a draught of pure spring water.

"And the green, Ann. The wonderful freshness."

Ann supposed the East was rather 'parched.'

"Well, there's the rainy season, you know. Look at that grass! Just look at those trees!"

She had been to Redmayne before, but only once and not at this time of year. The country was looking its best —green as she said and fresh, and at once cool and warm also. Everything pleased her. The sky that day was exquisite — blue with clouds of dazzling whiteness, which cast floating shadows on to the hills and uplands. Her eyes followed the clouds, followed their shadows. Cattle in the fields delighted her; a flock of sheep which the carriage met on the road and through which it passed clearing a way for itself; some horses in a paddock. She gave little rapturous exclamations.

And from time to time remembered.

Ann, yielding to the influence of her friend's pleasure, felt happier. She in turn remembered from time to time, but while Claudia remembered to

be unhappy, — or that she ought to seem unhappy, — Ann remembered how very unhappy she was.

So occasionally they fell into a silence which the sound of the trotting hoofs broke rhythmically.

Claudia always recovered herself in a moment or two. Something caught her attention and she forgot, or thought of something that she wanted to say and must say it whether or not it was in accord with the spirit of the previous interval.

Out of such a silence, when her thoughts were supposed to have fled to the grave in India, she said with a little spurt of laughter: —

"I know what it was like — the waters of the Red Sea."

Ann was astray — perhaps because the Red Sea was itself on the way to India, whither, at the guidance of a rather pointed sigh, she had directed her own thoughts.

"The sheep, you know," said Claudia. "They parted before us — even piled themselves up on each side of us, and the carriage, like the chariots of Israel, went through on — on — dry ground."

It was the yards of crape that made Claudia so droll. Ann's heart warmed to her. Some one to whom it was conceivable that you might be able to tell the things that you did not tell!

"I was right, Claudia. You have n't changed," she said.

"Ah, I 'm older inside," said Claudia.

They were approaching the house. Just before

they reached the lodge gates a horseman passed them. It was Timothy Coram. He looked amazingly handsome. It was inevitable that his appearance should excite comment from the newcomer.

Claudia, when Ann had told her who he was, said nobody ought to be so good-looking. That it was n't fair.

"It is n't, is it?" said Ann, glad to be able to speak lightly. "But fair to whom?"

"To anybody," said Claudia.

"His rivals?"

Claudia nodded.

"Or his victims," she added.

"Well, both are to be relieved of him," said Ann. "He 's going."

"Going?"

"Resigning the agency."

"How can you let him?" said Claudia. Her eyes scanned Ann's face.

"He wants to travel," Ann said shortly.

No more was said just then. Soon the carriage had passed in through the second gate, and she was welcoming Claudia to the house.

Claudia had spent her time in London in buying clothes. She had reached England, she declared, with little more than she stood up in. Two years of mourning were before her: a year of deep mourning, — such crapes and lawns as she was now wearing, — to be followed by a year of slowly decreasing woe-

fulnesses, merging through greys into the mauves and purples which would at length end them. What use, then, to keep what would be old-fashioned long before the prescribed periods were over? She had given away almost everything. She made Ann laugh with her descriptions of the varying attitudes of the recipients of her bounty.

"It was 'Dearest Mrs. Nanson, are you sure you have no use for it?' if it was n't an 'Oh, I could n't think of it!' or an 'Of course, it's very kind of you, *but* . . .' In the end I was able to persuade most of them, and had even a little difficulty in sticking to what I did want."

Claudia, then, had a trunkful of new dresses, and, the report of them reaching Ann's ears, Ann, for the honour of the house, but chiefly to please the impressed Branton, suffered herself to be arrayed a little more elaborately for dinner than had been her habit of late. It was thus two very 'fashionable' ladies who sat down to dinner that night in the big dining-room, and in the servants' hall it was said that the visitor's arrival had done good already.

Unquestioning and unquestioned days when each naturally fitted into that state of life to which it had pleased God to call him, and the server took pride in the grandeur of the served! Something to be said for such days. Ann did not question them. It would not have entered her head to question them. Claudia from India certainly did not question them. It is safe to say it would not have oc-

curred to the butler to question them, or to either of the two footmen slipping round the table so noiselessly and anticipating the wants and requirements of their mistress and her guest sitting up in their glory. Branton would not have questioned them. Piper in the housekeeper's room, with her piano and her brocaded curtains and her portrait on porcelain, would not have questioned them. Short shrift on the part of Piper for any underling in that house who had dared to question them. Safe, comfortable days before the world worried itself with thought! The best were at the top.

It was that afternoon, à propos howsoever indirectly, that a kitchen-maid had been summarily dismissed for trusting love and a lover over-well. Ann, distressed for the girl's fate, for she had noticed her and liked her, — yet distressed in an aloof sort of way, all the same, as one might be distressed to read of a massacre in China, or, more aptly, of the lynching of a negro in a Western State, — had concurred in the summariness, nothing doubting. No one had doubted — not Piper, terrible in her scandalized virtue; not Mrs. Thomas the cook; not one of the domestic staff; least of all the weeping girl herself. The best were automatically at the top, the lawgivers, the served. It was for the rest to minister and to behave themselves.

"But how comes it," asked Claudia, "that at this time of year you're not in London?"

Ann had expected some such question, but found

that she was not prepared for it. So much was involved and so little. She had not made up her mind yet whether she had sent for Claudia to confide in her, or whether she wanted her mere company in her loneliness. Meanwhile she took refuge in the truth, knowing that the surest way to conceal it was to tell it.

"I think it was the cuckoo that was primarily responsible," she said. "I heard him one day — or rather I listened to him."

"The cuckoo?" said Claudia; "what did he tell you?"

"To open my eyes and look about me."

"The Serpent's advice to Eve," said Claudia.

"Nevertheless, I thought I would take it," said Ann after a little pause.

Had she quite reckoned with Claudia when she had settled that the truth may be counted upon to conceal the truth?

"After the drive from the station to-day," Claudia was saying, "the beauty of the country and all that it offers, I think I don't wonder that you stayed."

In the boudoir, whither they adjourned after dinner, the two ladies occupied themselves with their needlework. They were both doing the same kind of work. The days of the antimacassar were over, and the crochet-hook had gone the way of the tatting-bobbin. Crewel-work had hardly yet ar-

rived. In fifty thousand drawing-rooms at that moment ladies, in the same preposterous, yet rather delightful trappings, were employed in the same sort of way. There may have been a name for the lace (was it?) which, in miles that must have been numberless, resulted. A faint blue tracing on paper had its important place amongst the materials involved. What was finished of the work accompanied what was in course of being done in a neat roll which was unpinned from time to time for inspection, admiration, or comparison. The supreme moment towards which the worker consciously or unconsciously strained was that in which she might tear away the paper scaffolding and display the completed structure. Claudia as she worked bowed her head over her needle; Ann, sitting more upright, held her work nearer to her eyes.

They worked and talked. The sound of the crinkling tissue paper, of the clicking scissors, or of the needles and thread passing in and out of the fabrics, filled the pauses.

Claudia bit her thread. Ann cut hers. "So peaceful," Claudia said, holding her work away from her a little, looking at it and pecking at it with her needle. "I'm quite sure that I understand your being here instead of in clamorous London."

Ann wondered whether she did.

Claudia pecked a little more at a pucker in her work.

"That good-looking young man," she said, with-

out raising her eyes from what she was doing — "why does he want to travel?"

"Why not?" said Ann.

She did not mean to let Claudia force her hand.

"Oh, well," said Claudia, still pecking. "Agencies like yours don't grow on every bush, do they? I've always understood that a good land-agency was a very hard thing to get. People generally have relations of their own — younger sons and cousins and things — only too glad to be put in. One of my poor Robert's brothers tried for years to get a land-agency. And ended by having to go into an insurance office, where he died — without having insured his own life I may say! — so it is n't a thing to give up lightly."

"Perhaps Mr. Coram is n't giving it up lightly," said Ann. "He is old enough, anyway, to know his own mind."

"He is about our age, I suppose," said Claudia.

"He is thirty-two, if you want to know," said Ann.

"Yes," said Claudia imperturbably, "I always do like knowing how old people are."

"And he won't have to look for another berth," said Ann, determining to be generous, partly because she had no particular objection to gratifying Claudia's curiosity, but more because she found it did, indeed, ease her to talk of the person in whom all her thoughts centred. "He has come

into some money. He is independent of what he may earn."

That gave Claudia to think — not merely because it was more rare to hear of people who came into money than of people who had lost that which they had. What Ann told her put Mr. Coram, perhaps, on a new footing. Involuntarily her eyes fluttered round the room with its rather sumptuous appointments. She — Claudia Nanson — had not been for a walk in a wood. She had not had a vision of sheer beauty. No inaudible voices had spoken to her. She — Claudia Nanson — thought Ann's room lovely. Its satins and its gildings delighted her. When she entered the room first she had expressed ecstatic admiration for it, for its arrangement, for all that it held. It was a woman's room and a rich woman's room. What Ann had seen — perceived rather — as only just on this side of vulgarity, as only saved, that is, from being vulgar, by the intrinsic 'goodness' of all that it contained or all that composed it, she — Claudia Nanson — saw as wholly and enviably admirable. From the Buhl cabinet (which one of these days — who knew? — might go the way of the porcelain 'enlargement' now in the housekeeper's room) to the hanging satin and beadwork screens, with their shining gold rods, Claudia found everything perfect.

She made no comment upon the information Ann had vouchsafed her, but, bending over her work again, said, "He looks well on a horse."

"My dear, you seem quite interested in him."

"Yes," said Claudia, plying her needle attentively. "Are n't you?"

Ann did not answer for a moment and Claudia looked up.

"Oh, I'm accustomed to him," said Ann then.

Tea was brought in at this moment and made a diversion. Ann was not sure whether she was glad or sorry. She watched the servants setting the tea-table in order, and when they had done so and had left the room, she took her place behind the urn and busied herself with the cups.

"This," said Claudia, "is what I do enjoy. My poor Robert had his little economies, and tea in the evening was one of them. I would n't have minded if his economies had been necessary."

She took the cup which Ann handed to her.

"Poor Robert," she said, "he never really liked tea."

Ann did not echo her sigh this time, nor indeed repress a smile of her own. She was beginning to see — was surely even intended to see — exactly how consolable, or even consoled, Claudia was. From the dimness of her school-days, moreover, a memory was making its way to her, piercing its way through the mists much as the carriage that day — to find another analogy for the incident — had forged a way for itself through the sheep. She had it now. Half a dozen girls in the senior classroom at Miss Petrie's in Brussels, chocolate-eating, in the tempo-

rary absence of the school-mistress, and engaged in a discussion on what they would like to be. As she stirred her tea absently she reconstructed the scene.

One had said: a famous singer — like Patti.

Another: an eminent painter — like Rosa Bonheur.

Another: a great writer — like George Eliot, or Mrs. Henry Wood.

A fourth — one, Clara Harbinger, the daring girl of the school, wearing her crinoline already with an air, and always alert to shock, or at least to contrive a sort of giggling consternation amongst her fellows: a — yes, boldly, brazenly! — a King's Mistress.

Ann remembered that the bomb Clara Harbinger thus exploded had duly had its success, its *succès*, that is, *de scandale*, but when all was said the real success of the discussion was voted to have fallen not to her, but to Claudia, who modestly wanted to be what was more within the boundaries of possibility. Ann, looking at her from behind the urn, could hear her saying it now.

"I," had said Claudia, "don't want to be a great anything, but don't on that account imagine that I am without my ambitions. I look round me and I see restraints hemming me in on every side. Here I am called upon to submit to my teachers — my pastors and masters. When I leave shall I be free? Not a bit of it. I shall have to go on submitting to my parents and guardians. When I marry" — ("*If* you marry!" from Clara; and, "Let her alone,"

from the others; "Let us hear! Go on, Claudia. When, as you say, you marry —") — "I shall have to submit to my husband. So I know exactly what *I* want to be." ("What's that?" from every one.) "Why, naturally," said Claudia, "a widow."

Fourteen or fifteen years back, but Ann remembered!

So it was a Claudia who had her wish — however little she had meant her wish seriously! — who, while she sighed from time to time, was very plainly enjoying, at any rate, her tea. Ann wondered whether she too remembered. Before Claudia left her, — before the visit should be over, — Ann thought she would ask her.

No more was said of Timothy Coram that night. At about a quarter to eleven the two ladies bade each other good-night, Ann having seen her guest to her room, but having declined her invitation to stay and talk, on the plea that she had letters to write when she went to her own. By a quarter to twelve Claudia, in the delightful four-post bed, had pleasantly read herself ("Ought We to Visit Her?") into a state of sleepiness, which, when the effort of blowing out the candles had been made and darkness enveloped her, rapidly merged into a state of blissful, untroubled sleep. Ann, after Branton's ministrations were over, wrote her letters, which had to do with the erring kitchen-maid, whom, though she

had allowed her to be dismissed at a moment's notice, she did not intend to leave friendless, and sought at length her own couch. Not to read. Not, she feared, to sleep. To think and think and think.

CHAPTER VI

ANOTHER day had gone of the days which she knew only too well were to be few. It had given her one glimpse of the man who had her heart — the heart which he did not even know was offered to him. If it was offered to him! Was it offered to him? She herself did not know. It had given her Claudia and the solace, the amusement even, which Claudia — funny Claudia! — afforded her. She was better for the coming of Claudia. She had got through a certain number of hours tolerably, but by so many hours — she always came back to this! — by so many hours were the hours that remained to her reduced . . .

She made no attempt to fly from love's sickness now. To what end? The poet in his poet's wisdom knew. You were yourself your own fever and pain. The last word was there. There was humiliation in the thought. But there was pride also. If it had not been for the pride that was there, and that turned the humiliation into a sort of glory, she could not, she thought, have borne her suffering. 'Borne'? — the word was meaningless. There is no escape from suffering. You had to bear what you were sent — had to bear certainly what, as in the case of her present distemper, you brought upon yourself.

So, while her guest slept the complacent sleep

of her achieved widowhood, she, widow also, but widow who had, perhaps, never really known wifehood, fought her way through the unendingnesses of the night. Towards morning she slept, and woke, when she did wake, calmer — woke refreshed, for no apparent reason unless that for its very acuteness her unhappiness had temporarily exhausted itself; refreshed, fortified, cheerful even.

Was she uncertain, variable? Did her moods fluctuate unduly? — ebb and flow ungoverned by any moon? St. Paul, who wrote indirectly of love, wrote directly enough of widows. Was his a last word also? Ann was to ask herself that when, at the family prayers which her husband, though he had never attended them, had always insisted should begin the day for his household, she found herself reading, as the portion of Scripture which had part in them that morning, the seventh chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians.

She read without a tremor; nay, with an inward smile. But she was not sorry that Claudia was late for prayers.

Claudia came into the room as the servants — one short — filed out of it.

Claudia looked very fresh and sweet and young by the searching light even of the early day. India had not wholly robbed her complexion of its fairness, and, what India had taken, the becoming contrast of the blackness of her appointments restored in full meas-

ure. The sun was streaming into the room. As she kissed Ann, who in her cool morning gown of brown holland, looked equally fresh if a little pale after her wakeful night, she seemed, her blacks notwithstanding, a very part of the prevailing brightness.

"It does me good just to look at her," Ann was thinking.

"Bacon," Claudia said, sniffing deliciously; "English bacon! And English hot rolls! And home-made bread! Smells you don't get in the East. My heart warms to them. How can anybody want to leave England?"

Already? So early in the day! Had she not parted with the idea all night? Ann had occasion again for her inward smile. There had always been something roguish in Claudia. That, after all, was why she liked her. It was certainly why Claudia just then was so good for her. But she did not mean to be drawn into talking of Timothy Coram yet, or, indeed, before she herself was ready to talk of him — if, at all, she should be ready to talk of him; so instead of answering, as it was her first impulse to answer, that man did not live by bread alone, — home-made bread even, English, and hot at that, — she contented herself with proposing that, as breakfast was ready and her guest happily hungry, they should fall to.

"With all my heart," said Claudia.

"The organ that warms to the smell of it?"

"The same," said Claudia, "with the concurrence of one or two others."

On a light note, then, a cheerful, bantering note, the day began.

Outside there was not a cloud in the sky. The windows were open to the gardens. Roses looked in — roses that asked to be picked and that asked also, so fair were they in their natural setting, to be spared. If you looked very closely you might see that dew in round shining drops was still on the petals of some of them. Ann as she waited for Claudia had seen it and spoken of it. Claudia had to jump up and slip over to the window to see too. She was like a happy child. She gave her little cry of delight. There was only one thing more beautiful than a dew-drop on a rose petal, she declared, as she went back to her place, and that was a dew-drop on a cabbage-leaf — a fat dew-drop (a rain-drop might do!) that ran about like quick-silver without wetting the leaf or breaking, and that, for the sheer beauty of it, you wanted to break.

"A diamond shaped like a pearl — more beautiful than any diamond, than any pearl. One wants to possess it. So one breaks it."

Ann was momentarily betrayed into saying the sort of thing that she did n't say or even believe.

"Possess anything," she said, "and find either that it never was there, or that you have destroyed it."

Perhaps it was Claudia who was uncertain. For Claudia at once said, "Stuff!"

Ann considered for a moment.

"Yes," she said, "you're quite right." And held out a laughing hand for Claudia's cup.

Perhaps she would tell her. She saw that Claudia at least was ready — ready for any confidence which she might concede to her or offer her. There was an 'And you know it!' tacked on to the 'Stuff!' Yes, and Ann did know it, her spirits rising. Claudia meant, 'Why should you not want what you want? — yes, and get it, and getting it, see that it is good?' She felt that she would be able to tell Claudia. If need should be. Yes, only if need should be.

Claudia, upon her part, eating a very good breakfast, was not, it was plain, in any hurry either. She laughed and talked, remembering less often to pull herself up, and presenting altogether a less artificial aspect — all women were a little artificial in the seventies! — than that which may be said to have presented her on her arrival. She had, clearly, a very happy nature. She had very pretty gestures and movements, which Ann liked to watch. Everything she did she did neatly. See her now slowly spreading butter on toast, or marmalade on both. Or see her raise her cup to her lips, or put it back into its saucer. Was it the precision of these actions that gave them their charm? She had the alertness of a thin woman with the leisureliness of a fat one. Physically she was between the two; plump and slender.

"You shall meet Mr. Coram," Ann said later in the morning.

"Mr. Coram?"

Claudia pretended not to remember; and then pretended to remember.

"Oh, yes, to be sure: Mr. Coram."

"I am asking him to dinner to-morrow night."

Perhaps because she had pretended, Claudia thought it necessary to demur a little. She murmured something about 'just yet' and looked at her mourning.

It was Ann this time who said 'Stuff!' though her actual words were: "Not a dinner party. Only Mr. Coram and ourselves."

But Claudia was not really a humbug and it was Ann's implied 'Stuff!' that she chose to answer with a show of her pretty, laughing teeth, though her ostensible answer was, Ah, well, if it was n't a party . . .

Ann was delighted.

"I would n't have her any different," she thought. "She is helping me. I may tell her."

What she knew in her heart was that if she did tell her it would be on some sudden impulse, in some sudden desperate need. Her respite did not blind her. This was one of those intervals which occur in bodily ailments — intervals in which pain is suspended only to return. It would be when the pain was there that she would speak. Yet, even as she knew that she knew this in her heart, she felt that it was not

inconceivable that in such a moment as the present, when she could think dispassionately and was completely mistress of herself and of her emotions, she might speak.

A messenger took her note to Mr. Coram's house, and brought back Mr. Coram's answer. He was coming.

The ladies drove in the afternoon. Claudia was at her best in a carriage — or was she at her best wherever she was and whatever she might be doing? Luxurious surroundings and accoutrements suited her; little grandeurs. An engaging air of having airs — though never of giving herself airs — was worn gracefully and graciously also. It delighted Ann, though she saw through it. Claudia was accustoming herself to what, though she had never had it, she felt herself born to — to what, her fulfilled wish notwithstanding, she would certainly have one of these days, and, having, would certainly adorn. For, her two years up, Claudia would marry again and marry well. Ann was as certain of that as if she had seen it inscribed in the Book of Fate.

As if Claudia guessed her thoughts, Claudia said now: —

"Are n't you a lucky person, Ann Forrester! Have n't the gods blessed you, my dear? I think you have everything the heart of woman could desire."

"I ought n't to be discontented."

"Are you discontented?"

Here, if she had been looking for opportunities, was an opportunity. Did Claudia deliberately make opportunities? She herself had made this one. Had Claudia, none the less, contrived it?

She was, of course, not going to take it.

"I have," she said with a smile that gave her words the necessary inverted commas, "much to be thankful for."

Claudia, settling herself amongst the cushions said, "I should just think you had."

So Ann, eased for the moment, but recognizing her respite as respite, marked time. She could listen to Claudia's chatter and enjoy it, aid and abet it. Her heart was strangely at peace, lulled, soothed. But she never lost sight of the imminence of reaction. She was not deceived. Her temporary immunity would have to be, and would be, paid for — paid for to the uttermost farthing.

"Would you like to have a glimpse of the sea?" she asked Claudia. "We might go round by Fotheringham."

The sea! Claudia would like that beyond everything. Inwardly she hoped that Fotheringham would prove to be a town. Her delight in the beauty of the country was quite unaffected, but it was nice to see and be seen. The bustle of a country town was always attractive. She looked forward to a drive on an early day into Windlestone, the large town of the neighbourhood; had visions of shopping; bare-

headed tradesmen at the carriage door taking your orders; or, the steps let down, your own rustling descent into the shops themselves. The spirit of the days of Patronage and of the real splendours still hovered over such shoppings.

Fotheringham, then, meanwhile.

"Yes, the sea," she said. "The sea! How I should like to bathe again! I used to be quite a tolerable swimmer."

"We might even manage a bathe for you," said Ann — "some morning when the tide serves."

"Ah, no," said Claudia. "That would n't quite do, would it?"

But this time she did n't sigh, though she murmured, "In such very deep mourning."

Fotheringham, which proved to be a small town, but still a town, showed considerable signs of life. The big Redmayne barouche rolled importantly through the narrow streets, where hats were raised to its occupants or touched to its liveries. Claudia saw and was seen — saw the market-place with its stocks, its sixteenth-century town hall, and its imposing church; was seen of all and sundry, and caused quite a little flutter amongst the young gentlemen at the bank, who — when Ann, bethinking her of some business she had to transact with the manager, had gone in — came one by one to the window outside which the carriage was standing, to take a peep over the iron blind at the interesting creature in

deepest black who sat in it with such a withdrawn expression and such plaintively lowered eyelids. Claudia, the pictured evidence that the exalted have their sorrows in common with ordinary humanity, sighed, enjoying herself greatly.

Then came Ann (who saw Claudia's sad sweet smile of greeting, gauging its probable inspiration, and was amused) and the drive was resumed. The Sea Front, on to which the carriage emerged now from the huddle of the town itself, was shining in the bright afternoon sun. Houses flanked it — lodging-houses for the most part, with a hotel or two and the usual percentage of boarding-houses. Fotheringham, at any rate, was not affected by the London season; had, indeed, a season of its own. The Fotheringham season in that year of lovely weather might even be said to have begun. The lodging-houses, with their round bow windows, and their balconies with the tin awnings and the slender iron pillars, were already filling up. Fascinating hours had been spent in these windows and on those balconies, and would continue to be spent before walls, windows, balconies, and all should fall to the speculating builder who sooner or later would come along and demolish them. Under those tin awnings the Claras and Floras who had deliciously read "East Lynne" — themselves superseding the Emmas and Matildas who had thrilled to the forbidden magic of Lord Byron — had given place to the Ethels and Enids

who now looked up from the pages of the early Ouida to watch the passing of the carriage.

All was fish that came to the net of the Widow Claudia. She enjoyed the admiring stare of the people on what was known as the 'Promenard'; of the elderly ladies who turned round or craned their necks from the seats and shelters; of even the nurses and children. Nor, her enjoyment of it notwithstanding (no one by the same token, so unconscious of it as she!), need we suppose her vulgar.

The tide was high. People were bathing. No mixed bathing then. A hundred discreet yards divided the two sets of machines. No pretty bathing-dresses then for ladies; no calculated glimpses of the human form divine. (The human form feminine — released, let us remember, from stays which, if they pulled it in in one part, were bound to push it out in another — itself a little less divine, perhaps, in those days!) Voluminous tunics the rigorous order; baggish ankle-long trousers; thick serges trimmed with braid; oilskin bathing-caps of yellow with a narrow edging of crinkly hard red worsted. No; ladies bathing were not pretty in those days. Susannah herself so clad for the bath would have attracted no elders, and the world have lost, thus, at least one moral tale.

But if bathing was uglier then, it was more amusing to watch. There was a ritual in which dipping had its part. One bather dipped another. So many

dips were necessary — bane of the bathing child! A minimum of three was prescribed. Parents and guardians saw that this rite was honoured. The Bathing Woman of the Leach pictures in "Punch" still survived and ministered. Dipping, one of the duties of her office. There was the ritual of the ring. Small companies of persons ranged themselves in circles and bobbed. There was a little swimming; a good deal of tentative swimming; some floating — a friend at hand to support if need be. There were decorous splashings. But bobbings ruled the procedure. Most of the bathers, strange balloony or lank clothes-clogged figures, were content to bob and bob and bob. An innocent diversion. A happy ugly throng.

The carriage passed on. The view had been transitory, but not unsatisfying. Claudia, however, no longer wanted to bathe. How silly they looked bobbing up and down. She said so.

"And their clothes. Why do they make themselves so hideous?"

"Most of them are hideous," said Ann, smiling.

"But if they were n't they would still make themselves. I'm not, and I'm quite certain you're not. If one is well made by nature, why should one be ashamed to acknowledge it?"

Very daring for the seventies! The body then was hardly supposed to exist.

"Look," she said vaguely, "at the Venus of Milo."

That, Ann said, — but said, still smiling, for she liked Claudia in this mood and was not the least shocked, — that was sculpture; a statue.

And then as the words themselves, with their sudden thrust to the wood and what it held enshrined and hidden, caused the smile to falter and die away upon her lips, she had, before she lowered her eyes almost in terror, the briefest but fullest glimpse of a thing that was itself sculpture; a statue.

There was an anchored raft a stone's throw from the shore. On this, tilting it a little by his weight and swaying with it to the rhythm of its gentle rocking, a bather stood poised for his dive. The custom which decreed that women should be made ugly in the water by the cumbersomeness of their dress made no such demands on men. Rather, perhaps, did it make less demand than in these days. That the male should, in the words of the Scriptures, be 'girt about the loins' was all that was held necessary. Timothy Coram, stripped, outlined in that fleeting moment against the shining sea, was a sight that asked to be perpetuated in marble or bronze.

CHAPTER VII

Nor was it for nothing that Timothy Coram was cast in the mould of the heroes of ancient Greece. If Ann, his patroness, had not been as innocent fundamentally as a baby, she must have known it. Her own innocence and perhaps his shyness, something even of an innate modesty in his composition, blinded her. She was as unsuspecting as she was innocent. There were merry wives even in the seventies — frisky matrons who lived the life even then. Her dead husband would have known — had known. Then as now there were rippling streams; deep pools. It was not at Redmayne only that Timothy Coram, the handsome young land-agent, was a welcome guest. He was popular in the county. The men liked him. If the wives and daughters of some of them liked him more than their husbands and fathers knew — well, their husbands and fathers did n't know and that was all about it. Not that Timothy Coram was n't to be trusted. Given no Mrs. Potiphars, he was to be trusted absolutely. He accepted a position which was thrust upon him — had, perhaps, to accept it. He was as good-natured as he was shy.

Lady Mallard, that bird of gay plumage and unending youth, — now, of course, in London, — dined often at Redmayne; Ann, often with her at Clois-

tron. These kissed when they met. Lady Fotheringham, that engaging, good-looking trollop — her lord had other fish to fry and may have winked. Miss Mallinger, — Ione, — thirty, emancipated, cold as a stone in her classical beauty to look at, but warm, it was said, to the touch. These three. There were others. These three of Ann's intimates — of that inner circle in which she moved. And Ann, unawakened, did n't know; awakening even, did n't guess. She was of the kind that gossip does n't reach. She suspected Lady Mallard not at all; Lady Fotheringham, despite her exuberance, — her raffishness even, — as little as she suspected the immaculate, the unsuspectable Miss Mallinger. She knew, moreover, as we have seen, of Timothy's shyness, and thus would not have guessed. She did n't know that he could use it, make it of service to him, find shelter in it, get behind it if need be. When all is said it was his muscles and his good-nature which were his undoing — if he could truly be supposed to be undone! He yielded rather than sought — did not, indeed, seek, and may have rebelled sometimes when silken cords threatened to choke him, or even unduly to bind him. The cords may have had to do indirectly with his wish to travel. What bound him to Redmayne and — if she could have known it — to Ann herself was that here at least there were no cords at all. He was really unfeignedly loth to leave Redmayne and Ann.

Yet he wanted to go. As he bathed he had a boy's visions of bathing in other seas, — warm seas, crystal-clear, coral-floored, or bottomed with golden sand, — seas, the dwellers and sojourners on the coasts of which become, by reason of the lure of them, almost amphibious. Yes, he wanted to see the world; wanted the larger freedom of the wanderer; and, in addition to these, did, indeed, want perhaps (less indirectly than we have just ventured to guess at! . . . not indirectly at all?) respite if not rest from the Mallards and Fotheringhams and Mallingers which here at home had somehow — in a very real unconceit he knew not how — sprung up about him.

He stretched his limbs on the swaying raft — wanted really to stretch them as wings. The time for migration was at hand.

He dived for a last swim. He was a strong swimmer, thrusting his way through the water, pushing it behind him. With clean strokes he cleared a passage for himself through the resisting but always yielding thing which seemed itself to enjoy the contest as much as he — seemed, as a lover, to enjoy enveloping him, holding him, staying him if that could be or could have been. So for a hundred yards he swam enjoying the rapid motion, the push of it; then turned like a seal and made leisurely for the shore.

Presently, the Redmayne carriage long passed,

all unperceived, and on its way back to Redmayne, he was splashing through shallowing waters to his machine, and presently with the rough sun-dried towels, which smelled of the sun and the sea, rubbing himself to a glow on its wooden sandy floor. Even here in the intimacies of the cramped box of a machine, sculpture — the last thing that would have suggested itself to his unconsciousness — sculpture all the time! Sitting on the wooden seat drying his foot, he must, if there had been any there to see, have suggested a prototype — larger, of course, maturer — of the sitting youth who looks for the thorn. Standing, his legs a little apart, his right hand running over the muscles of his left arm, he was the athlete using the strigil; and (to race across the centuries) stooping as he dried his back, the towel pulled to a rope across his shoulders, and his knees bent with the vigour of his exertion, as he plied it, the Athlete of Leighton, struggling with a Python.

He dressed leisurely, fetched his horse from the George III in the High Street, and presently was riding back to Lower Redmayne.

Something was puzzling him. As he rode it was not of Mallards or Fotheringhams or Mallingers that he was thinking. Of these he did not at any time think more than might be. He was thinking of Ann. And he did not know why he was thinking of her — that, in itself a part of what was puzzling him. Thoughts of her lately had forced their way into his mind. It was as if they hovered about him, waiting,

watching even, for their opportunity to enter. They came to him from without rather than from within, while most thoughts — the thoughts of his projected travels, for example — came from within. They came to him, however, these thoughts of Ann, and they came persistently. As he jogged home to the pleasant tune of his horse's hoofs on the road, and of the warm creakings of his saddle under him, the thoughts of Ann rode with him. They were pleasant thoughts, yet, partly because they puzzled him, they disturbed him. As she upon her part had visualized him, as we have seen, in the library at Redmayne, so he, in turn, visualized her. What was it in her face that seemed to speak when the lips, perhaps, were silent, — that, when she was speaking, seemed to speak irrelevantly of anything that the voice might say? What was that which looked at him through, or from behind, the calmness of the eyes? The calmness was unfaltering. Ann had not deceived herself in believing that she had masked her feelings. She had masked them completely. Something may be supposed to have penetrated through the substance and complexion of her mask, but it is safe to say that Timothy Coram, though he was disturbed a little himself, had not an inkling, not the ghost nor shadow of an inkling, of her disturbance. What was it, he asked himself, then, that brought her before him? He could only think that it was the knowledge that he was so soon to leave her. Yes; it was of a part with that anticipated nostalgia which

he had spoken of to her in connection with his little house — the very stones and beams of it. Only thus could he account for what would else have seemed unaccountable.

He saw her in her silks and laces — the strange clothes that did not look strange to any one in those days. Such femininity of clothes! — clothes more feminine surely than any that women have worn since. He saw her in the cool brown hollands, and the striped or sprigged cottons that she wore in the summer mornings. He saw her in garden hats. He saw belts that she wore — one notably, from which hung a 'châtelaine' which clicked and jingled when she moved. The soft jingling had often heralded her approach along the passage to the library where he waited for her. He would hear it, jingle, jingle, click, click, and the door would open and she would advance to him with her gracious smile.

He saw her in winter things — furs; the short sealskin coat of the period. Saw her against a background of snow in the park, her hands in her muff (which was very small); scarlet berries in her hat. He saw her driving her own ponies — a little parasol in the handle of the whip. He saw her in the big carriages in which she looked so regal. He saw her in church — her prayer-books bound in ivory; bookmarkers of ribbon, which ended in little ivory bars or crosses, depending from them. The little bars and crosses clicked, as the châtelaine with clickings jingled.

He saw her in many guises and aspects, and in all of them she was charming. She was so 'unmistakable' (as the phrase went then) — so unassailably well-bred. And — but was it only now that he was discovering this? — she was so very pretty. And, in spite of her dignity and her suaveness and her authority, so young. He had only lately seen her as young. Was she younger than she had been? Had she — some time in the last few weeks — even grown younger?

Puzzlement, it will be manifest, for Timothy Coram, who, his successes — his *bonnes fortunes* — notwithstanding, remained a very boy. He was, though he only half knew it, of the kind which experience does not teach . . . Or perhaps it was not so much experience that he had — that came his way — as experiences: a very different thing. Be this as it may, he certainly did remain inexperienced. Though he should have Don Juan's own adventures he would die inexperienced — if he should live to be ninety. In other words, he was, in a way, as innocent as the innocent Ann herself.

So, puzzled and puzzling, he rode through the green lanes and the sleepy summer afternoon. The stillness of summer had settled now on the land. The birds had nested and ceased their love-songs — the purpose of their love-songs accomplished. No need to sing when love's work is done. Do not even human beings as much — or, shall we say, as little? — the female human being, anyway? Celia

married — is it not common plaint? — gives up her music! In the bird world, then, only at the beginning and the close of day were the songs heard now. No cuckoo's note to lead pilgrims to the heart of the wood. Who went to the shrine of the waiting youth must find it for himself.

Timothy Coram, choosing the lanes rather than the dusty highroad, approached Redmayne from the side of the wood. To him the clearing was not a hidden place as it was to Ann. He had always known it. Was there an inch of Redmayne that he did not know? But he had never realized it. It made no appeal to him. It was just a clearing in the wood. The statue, just a statue. A forgotten statue, moreover. If he had ever thought about the statue at all, it was to wonder why it was still there — why it had not been swept away long ago. He took it for granted and just did not think about it. Woods were n't for statues. Woods were for game.

He entered the wood by the bridle path which Ann had come across in her wanderings. No; to him not an enchanted spot, though, indeed, he loved it. No mystery in it or in the long aisles which cut it into unequal sections. For him just a wood — which you could see in spite of the trees! — and ways through it which you could take on horseback at the trouble of an occasional stooping of the head, or a holding-back of the leafy branches which yet swished about your shoulders and ears as you made your jogging progress.

The branches had grown since last he had used this path. He seldom used it. No one else, he supposed, used it at all. But it should be usable. He must put a man or two to work on it. There was always some one for whom a job had to be found or devised. Here, then, overhead, were loppings to be done, thinnings; below, tidyings, sweepings. The jungle, as we should say now, had been let in and must be thrust back, kept at bay.

Presently he was conscious of something discordant, something out of tune, that is, with the pleasant influences of the place and the hour. He drew rein and listened. The sounds came from the thick of the wood to his right; harsh cries of pain and terror with beatings and flappings of frenzied wings.

He dismounted and tethered his horse to a tree. He pushed his way through the undergrowth in the direction whence the sounds came to him. They ceased and were renewed, then ceased again, and then, as the noises that his own movements made, — snappings of twigs, crashings of little branches, and rustlings of disturbed leaves, — preceded him, were renewed more fiercely.

The bird, a magpie, was caught by the wing in a thicket, as Abraham's ram by the horn. The thicket was one of those which choked the alleys in the mouths of which stood the terminals facing the statue. Between him and the back of the satyr's head which was towards him he saw a sort of scream-

ing welter of black and white which he could not reach. He was looking into the alley from the blocked end of it, and to get at what it held captive he must approach and enter it from the other side. He retraced his steps for a few yards, bore to the left, and entered the clearing at the spot at which Ann had entered it. The swaying briar was there still, or the briar rather which had swayed, for it swayed no longer and was now the core of a rope of growing things stretching across from one tangle to another. He dealt with it summarily with his foot. But in any case it would have held no symbolism for him.

Thus he entered the circle — led thither, after all, like Ann, though all so differently, by the cry of a bird!

He passed the smiling satyr. The accident which had made the bird captive could not long have happened when he had heard the creature's cries, for, though the bushes were pied with its feathers, it had still the strength to struggle violently. Fight as well as fear was in its shining eyes as he came near. It flapped vehemently, pecking viciously at his hands with its open beak.

"Now — now — now," he said.

But though it was at bay it meant battle, and to reason with it availed nothing. It spread the wing that was free, the pin-feathers standing out separately. So angry it was and so frightened — so angry because so frightened. It struggled upward desperately, only to subside into a huddled yet spread

mass of black and white, from which its open beak projected menacingly. All that was unconquered in it was concentrated in eyes and beak — remained concentrated in eyes and beak as, to the wild thumping of its heart against them, it had to yield to the capable hands. Very firmly, but very gently also, they folded the free wing and imprisoned the throbbing body. One of them then, the body held by the other, dealt with the member which was caught. The wing was tightly wedged between two strong twigs which pressed the one against the other. The more the creature had struggled, the more tightly had the wing become wedged. The task of extricating it took some difficult but very patient minutes.

Then it was that the odd thing happened. So absorbed had he been in his work of rescue that the sounds that must otherwise have apprised him of nearing footsteps had not penetrated to his consciousness, and it was not till he stood with the bird free and ready for release, and held for a moment to his breast, — like a dove, as the newcomer thought, to the breast of a mediæval saint, — that he became aware that he was not alone. It was the Ann Forrester who had so persistently been with him on his ride, rather than the Mrs. Forrester whom he served, who now stood watching him.

He held out the bird to her.

"A trap?"

He shook his head.

"Not one of ours," he said. "Not one contrived by man at all. Nature made the snare that caught this little beggar. I heard him as I was riding through the wood."

She looked from him to the bird. It was not struggling now. Did it want to go? She may have been wondering that. Could it? She looked away frowning. It was as if the sight hurt her; could he have explained that to himself! Could one subtler than he have been expected even to guess at jealousy of a bird?

But "Let it go," she said quickly; thickly.

He opened his hands. For one moment, almost as if, indeed, it did not want to leave its warm prison, the bird did not move. It was at a sudden movement on the part, not of the man who held it, but of the woman who only watched, that it spread its wings with a sharp cry and disappeared over the trees.

They both looked after it, but could not follow its flight.

The silence of the wood descended on them.

"This strange place," Ann said nervously. "It was only lately . . ."

She broke off. He looked to follow the direction of her eyes, and saw that one of his hands was bleeding.

CHAPTER VIII

ANN had come in from her drive restless — driven! — a perplexity to Claudia, who mercifully had not 'seen,' and who had thought the drive, as, indeed, she said, a particularly pleasant one.

"When I am in the country I do love driving into a town."

"Do you?" said Ann; but added warmly that she was delighted that Claudia had enjoyed herself.

On the way home she had hardly been able to listen to what Claudia said. She had had to be on her guard, moreover, or she must have answered her at random. Her unrest had been cumulative. By the time they reached the house Claudia was prepared for some sort of outbreak. None came, but Ann — driven, indeed — knew that her own safety lay in withdrawing herself.

Presently, excusing herself she knew not how, and a little angry that she should have felt constrained to excuse herself, she slipped away from the drawing-room — leaving her guest to finish her tea by herself, and leaving her, she knew, to wonder about her. She had not taken off her things and by that she knew that she meant to go out. Claudia would know it, too. Well, what matter? What matter what Claudia knew or did not know, thought or did

not think? Claudia, of course, was a dear; was her greatest friend; was a real friend. She cared for her truly — loved her, indeed. It was only that at the moment, at the mercy as before of her own nerves, she felt that her observant presence was an embarrassment.

Presently she was in the garden — presently flitting from the garden. In a quarter of an hour she was in the wood. Then she knew.

Only the statue could help her — the waiting youth in his hidden shrine. For his very silence he would help her. She would tell him, though in telling him she would be telling not him at all, but that other whose burning had expressed itself in the cold beauty of the chiselled stone. No, not cold. Even now she could feel the cheek of the statue warm against her own. She quickened her pace.

The wood received her. The cool green shade of it soothed her. Very different this time was her progress from that of her first venture. Then she had been a fine lady making a voyage of discovery impeded by her instinctive consciousness of her finery. Actually, perhaps, she was not less 'fine' now than then, but then her steps had been tentative, and in her aspect as in her actions the furling and unfurling of her parasol had had a part which was significant of her whole attitude towards life. Now, though she carried a parasol, it was from habit only, and she made no attempt to use it. It fell into its place as a wholly unimportant — superfluous, even

— adjunct to her equipment. She was intent on her purpose. As she entered the wood she had gathered her skirts about her high above the white petticoat, and thereafter gave them no thought.

She found the bridle path which led to the circle. Long before she could see to the end of it, she saw, as clearly as if her eyes were already upon it, the white figure looking down the long aisle. Waiting. Waiting. Always waiting. But it was the waiting of expectation not of hope merely — the waiting of one who knows that what he wants will come. Endurable such a waiting as that. Happy even. Had the unknown sculptor known it? Did she know it? Was it because he had not known it that he had expressed what he did not know, what he was never to know, in the enduring loveliness of his creation? Was that why he would understand when she should tell him — when it was to him that she would be speaking, though her words, if she found any, would be addressed to the work of his hands?

To her also came the sound of the bird's cries. They did not interpret themselves to her as they did to the other who heard them, for to her the cry of snared things in fur or feather was not familiar. For her as for him, however, the sounds were a jarring note. In the brooding peacefulness of the wood they spoke of pain and panic. They ceased; were renewed; ceased. Then another sound smote her ear. The soft whinnying of a horse. This startled

her. A horse here must have a rider. She had thought the wood empty from end to end. Who shared its solitudes with her?

She was approaching the circle. Now, indeed, she could see the waiting boy. He leaned towards her. Something oddly appealing in the tilt of his body. It was for every one who might come down the long aisle, but for each one it was individual, selective even. Ann in her need was beset by no doubts. It was for her. As she looked she knew that she would find words.

And then she became aware of another presence. The colour rose in a sudden wave to her face as she recognized the back that was towards her. The tide ebbed as quickly as it had risen and may for a moment or two have left her very white. But she had time to recover herself, for, we know, it was not till he had turned that he saw her.

The few words that we have heard passed between them. Her emotions were conflicting indeed. The joy that the sight of him gave her was always inseparable now from pain, and the sight of the bird in his arms was more, almost, than she could bear. His tenderness towards it, the contrast of his strength with its weakness, the way that the strong hands enfolded it, something even in its quiescence under their sheltering pressure forced from her the "Let it go!" which was spoken almost against her will. When he opened his hands and it still did

not move, her own rustling movement was entirely involuntary. She might be said to have breathed again when the bird rose with its cry. It was as if she too had been freed . . .

Now the wood seemed, indeed, to hold him and her only. Could it be for nothing that it was in this place of all places that they should meet? The silence, like the surrounding trees, isolated them together. Did he come here knowing its strange influences? Only strange things could happen here. Anything that happened here would be strange — different from anything that might happen elsewhere. She was impelled to break the silence, though she prized it. She said, "This strange place," as we have heard; and then, just as she had seen drops of blood upon her own hand on that strangest day of all her life, she saw drops of blood on his. It was as if, asking a sign, or, at least, ardently desiring a sign, a sign had miraculously been vouchsafed to her. Open to us, later, to remember or not as we choose how generations (opposed, let us hope, to individuals!) have been characterized when they in their time have sought after a sign! Ann, however, did not, perhaps, so much seek after a sign as recognize one. We, beginning to know Timothy, shall at least be reminded here of his attitude towards love!

A strange moment followed — for him astray, perplexed; for her (unaccountably, surely?) exultant.

Then Ann remembered that the bird had been a magpie.

Coram wiped the blood from his hand, looking his bewilderment. Not so distant yet the days when ladies had fainted at the sight of blood. He would have understood if what she had shown had been dismay. It was nothing of the sort.

But she was speaking.

"I wish it had n't been a magpie."

He closed eagerly on what he did understand. Ladies were superstitious.

"'One for . . .'? Oh, but I'll show you others," he said, smiling. "There are scores this year. The wood is full of them."

He was n't telling her that they — he and she — were not out of the wood yet! He was not capable, as she would have known if she had thought about it, of such a flight as that. At any other moment she might have felt this to be disappointing. But she was occupied now with the emotions which had already been roused.

"You shall have your 'Two for mirth,'" he promised her.

"It's all I ask," she said, smiling in turn. But that was n't all that she asked now and she knew it.

Silence fell again between them. A big yellow butterfly came flapping over the trees. It alighted upon the head of one of the smiling satyrs and after a moment or two, as if unsatisfied there, fluttered over to the statue. On the sun-warmed surface of one of the resting arms, it spread its wings wide.

Ann sat down on the stone seat. Timothy Coram had tied his handkerchief round his hand that the minute drops of blood, which (like her own) had formed and re-formed, might be covered.

"How ungrateful of the little wretch!" Ann said, — "how ungrateful to wound the hand that succoured him!"

But she looked pleased.

"Nothing but fright," said Coram.

"I did n't say I did n't understand," Ann said, still with the same look of contentment.

The butterfly shut and opened his wings, turning this way and that in the sun, and then again spread them close, close to the warm stone.

"Why have I only just discovered this place?" she said then. "Why did n't any one tell me of it? Why did n't you?"

"Did n't you know of it?"

"Of course I 've known of it. But why have n't I ever seen it? been made to see it? It only needed to be seen. This is just the second time that I have seen it and it has been here always."

He looked from her to the statue and then round the clearing itself, his eyes pausing at each of the three smiling satyrs.

"One goes abroad to see places like this," she said.

She was falling again under the spell. Her eyelids felt heavy. The butterfly was quite still now, giving itself luxuriously to the sun and the warm stone. There was a drowsy hum of insects. A bumble-bee,

half drunk with honey or weighted with his load, blundered out of a foxglove on to the seat beside her and rolled over before he found his wings. Gentle lapping influences were here.

"Look!" Coram cried suddenly as one who cries "Mark!" and Ann, following the indication of his turning head, was in time to catch a momentary glimpse of black-and-white wings.

Yet it was at this moment that Ann, happy in what the day, nothing-promising, had given her, had her presentiment that mirth was the last thing she could — or would, perhaps, even if she could! — hope to have reason to express. Love would never be to her a laughing matter. Light love was nothing to her; was not love; did not exist for her. She had a sudden deadly misgiving that love was torment, the surrender of your peace of mind . . .

The moment passed. The butterfly closed its wings and opened them again to the sun. A second butterfly entered the circle. The first left the warm stone. The two chased each other sporting in the air. The influences of the spot, lulling, deceiving even, reëstablished themselves.

And to Ann it seemed that the spell communicated itself to him also. He came over and sat down on the moss at her feet, and, though they talked of nothing intimate, she felt that a change had come over their relations. He saw, moreover, the beauty of the statue. She could have told almost the exact

moment at which its beauty revealed itself to him, though he did not at once speak of it. He had seen this statue a hundred times, she knew, without seeing it at all — seen it with holden eyes. Now he saw it. She watched its effect upon him; liked to watch it. She was very glad that he had chosen the ground rather than the seat, for, thus, she need keep no guard over her own eyes. He had taken off his hat. His hair was thick as the hair of a boy.

"One could swear he was going to speak," he said out of one of the unstrained silences. The easiness of the silences here in the humming silence of the wood was itself notable — a source of unconsidered happiness to Ann. Neither felt constrained to break the silences when the silences fell.

"I think he does speak," Ann said.

"Do you know what he says?"

"I think I could hear. I think I came here now to try to hear."

"Then I . . ."

"No," Ann said.

In spite of her her eyes filled with tears. He was so near to her. She could have touched his hair.

Presently Ann rose.

"I must go," she said.

Timothy Coram rose also.

They went and stood before the statue. Their joint action was in some sort a leave-taking.

"If he *could* speak!" Ann said. "He waits here day and night in the loneliness and the silence. Where does he come from? Where did he wait before he waited here? Since I first saw him I have waked in the night sometimes and thought of him sitting here looking down the long path . . ."

Coram looked from the statue to her. New thoughts seemed to be moving in his mind.

"Night would be the time to see him," he said. "He is stained and weather-beaten. He would n't be then. When the moon's up he would be as white as the marble he was hewn out of."

Lyrical for Timothy Coram! Assuredly he was under the spell. But Ann did not think of that now. It seemed natural that he should have such thoughts, use such words to express them. When she saw him pluck a leaf — sweet-briar — and lay it at the boy's feet, that seemed natural also.

They stood for a moment or two in silence. Then the horse whinnied again.

Presently they were walking down one of the long paths, he, ahead, leading his horse, she following, her eyes upon his back. He would not ride. There was not room for three, man, woman, and horse, to walk abreast. From time to time he turned to speak.

The twigs snapped under their feet. The leaves swished. Grasses bent and quickly or slowly righted

themselves. Long after the little procession had passed, there would be minute rustlings amid the displaced growing things as they straightened or disentangled themselves. Some would never be straightened at all nor released.

A pheasant crowed and she heard a rush of wings. Ann saw a squirrel looping to a tree. At one point a scent which she did not recognize was the scent of a fox. It had its part in making the life of the fields and the woods seem very near, but very cautious, very shy. What did she want? The Garden of Eden? The lion lying down with the lamb? Conditions in which the wild things should seek no covert at your approach, trust you because you were one with them, come to you?

They emerged from the wood. After its soft green twilight the open light of the unshaded fields was dazzling. Ann blinked her eyes, as the pantomime fairies of one's youth blinked theirs when, from the darkness under the stage, they came up through a trap into the glare of the footlights. She had not accustomed her eyes to the unshaded brightness when Timothy Coram once more, and as suddenly as before, cried, "Look!"

Two magpies had broken simultaneously from a hedge. For a single moment at the angle at which Ann saw them one partially obscured the other, so that, to her eyes, already confused by the sun, the black-and-white flappings seemed those of one bird. The illusion lasted veritably but for a heart's beat

or the twinkling of an eye, though in that space she had had time for a ridiculous inward 'That's three!' Then the angle changed, and immediately what had seemed one bird showed itself to be two.

Thus, the day's harvest was four.

Ann laughed.

"You were right," she said; "I need n't have been afraid that I should be left with my 'One for Sorrow.'"

But what she did not notice was that, in the odd way in which the thing had happened, the 'Four' she was ultimately left with had seemed, as it revealed itself, to wipe out altogether the 'Three' upon which she had closed.

CHAPTER IX

TIMOTHY came with Ann as far as the gate of the lower garden, where Claudia, from the window of the boudoir, to which idleness had brought her, saw him take leave of her, mount his horse, and ride away. She smiled to herself, and withdrew a little into the shelter of one of the curtains. Ann was coming slowly towards the house. She did not look back. Timothy Coram did. He turned in his saddle and followed Ann's retreating form, Claudia observed, till it was out of the range of his eyes. It was then that Claudia jumped to her conclusion — to the conclusion which indirectly, or perhaps even directly, was to have such momentous results.

Claudia could be as quick in her movements as in her conjectures. She was sitting in the distant library, a book — "Red as a Rose is She" — in her hands, when, a minute or two later, her hostess, having drawn the boudoir and the drawing-rooms blank, came there to look for her.

"Oh, here you are," Ann said.

Claudia nodded gaily.

"Here I am," she answered, waiting, content to wait, for what Ann should say next.

Ann came across to her and leaning over her chair laid her cheek for a moment against hers. Claudia in contact with her knew at once that the restlessness

which had possessed her an hour or two earlier was past. She saw also that a calmed and softened Ann wanted to make amends.

"Dear Ann," she murmured gently.

"Was I horrid just now?" Ann said. "I don't know what was the matter with me."

Claudia thought to herself that *she*, then, knew very well indeed. But before she had time or need to speak, Ann, bending nearer before withdrawing her face, had added: "You'll make allowances for me, I know. Perhaps some time I shall tell you."

"Whenever you feel that you want to tell me," Claudia said — "if you ever feel that you want to tell me . . ."

"I think I shall want to tell you."

Claudia pressed the hand which still held one of hers.

"Dear Ann," she said again. But as she became aware at the same moment that the book she was holding was upside down, she floundered a little over the "But on no account unless you do feel that you want to tell me," which she had intended should be so disarming in its ingenuous fervency.

She stole a glance at Ann to see if she had observed. Ann's eyes, however, were elsewhere, and Claudia closed her book and put it down.

The moment passed like the others. Ann did not speak. But clearly something had happened. Had she gone out to meet the handsome agent? Claudia, though she had not seen the bather, did not think

so. The meeting she fancied had been fortuitous, but whatever its nature, whatever the circumstances attending it, its effect upon Ann was palpable. It was as if something had been lifted, or as if something which would not suffer her to rest had been removed. All her gracious serenity had returned to her.

"Come into the garden for a few minutes before we go up to dress. It is wrong to be indoors."

Claudia rose at once and with linked arms the two ladies went out into the garden. The sun was lower in the heavens now, but his radiance was undiminished. The air was a-hum with wings, and honey-sweet with the scent of flowers. Gardeners were busy watering. A long hose, supported at intervals on little pairs of wheels, which gave it an air of having legs, lay like some monstrous reptile upon the smooth green turf of a lawn. When from time to time, as the gardeners gave it a tug, it moved its sinuous length across the grass, the illusion of life was heightened. Claudia, despite her preoccupation with the emotions and affairs of Ann, watched it, fascinated.

"Is n't it like something before the flood — the monsters you see pictures of in the magazines! Do look, Ann! It's running. It does n't really like running, because, though it has legs, it is cursed like the serpent in Genesis and its belly cleaves to the dust. Oh, Ann, is n't it ridiculous when it runs!"

But it was Claudia who was ridiculous, and Ann

loved her. She began to know certainly that she should tell her. She wanted to tell her now. She wanted to say: "Claudia, I've seen him. I've seen him. I've been with him. I've been with him in the wood. I've been with him in a wonderful place. I've made him see beauty. He saw it through me. But for me he would have missed it as he has missed it a hundred times before. But now he sees and he always will see. His eyes are opening, Claudia . . ."

And then, as she thought back to what she herself had seen: "And *he* is sheer beauty himself . . ."

At that she paused, knowing what she knew — knowing that she knew more than Claudia — Claudia who had said that no one ought to be so good-looking! Ah, she knew more than Claudia. And then, because she knew him to be beautiful, she felt the colour deepen in her cheeks. Yet why? Why should she not think of that as beautiful which was beautiful? Why not, if she wished, even speak of it in words? What was this fear of the body which (then, at any rate) stultified the meaning and purpose of life? What was the purpose of beauty if not that it should be desired? Why had the very flowers scents, colours? There was nothing to be ashamed of. She was not ashamed. Nor was this shame that she was feeling. It was gladness, exultation. And so, though she did not know it, another stage was reached.

She pressed Claudia's arm and knew, or half knew,

that it was for love of Coram that she made this movement of affection towards Claudia. How strange it was! How strange were all her emotions! How changed she was from the Ann Forrester who had sat waiting for the carriage and had heard the cuckoo's note! . . .

And she knew that Claudia, though she was not watching her, observed her. This did not annoy her or even disturb her. It gave her rather a sense of well-being. Claudia was there, interested, beneficent, responsive.

In the rose garden every rose was a censer sending up its fragrance as incense to the warmth and the light. Here were great red or white or pink roses in which, drinking in their fragrance, you could bury your face.

Claudia moved about amongst them, saying, "Look!" and "Look!" and "This one!" and "Oh, this one!" She made it plain, now, that she would make no attempt to force her friend's hand. Ann, therefore, wished to tell her. The one restraint upon her was the thought of the next evening when Coram was coming to dinner. The day passed without her telling her. Claudia's face, like Ann's, was set towards the next evening.

CHAPTER X

Ann had a dress which she had never worn.

The last year of Mr. Forrester's life had seen him the prey to strange moods. He was variable, uncertain, the victim of his nerves. He knew that he was doomed and that protest was vain. He had lived his life and was not dissatisfied, on the whole, with what life had given him. The bill had come in and he was prepared to meet it. But there were days when even to him the price seemed too high. Winton, his man, could have told. Ann, always a little outside her husband's life, though she hardly realized this, knew, rather through Winton than through her husband himself, when the stress had been greatest. Winton adored his master and said nothing. But from time to time a day would come when she, too, had to bear her share, when the irritation spread past servants and bath attendants and masseurs to her also. She, to her credit, like Winton to his, understood. She would have understood better if she had been allowed nearer, but even as things were she understood. Always after the outbreak came the reaction. The overbearingnesses over, there were tractabilities, gentlenesses, which made up to Winton for everything, tendernesses even. To Ann there were attentions. The dress,

like many of her many jewels and trinkets, represented such an attention.

It was a very simple dress, quite unlike the elaborate dresses of those days. Looking for something that should please her, he had found it himself, and had insisted on buying it for her in the face of Ann's argument that its cost, which was considerable, was quite disproportionate to the use which the nature of its fashioning could ever allow it to be to her. It was copied from some mediæval Florentine garment, and was of a deep sapphire blue — the colour of a dark sea or distant mountains. It was woven throughout of silk, which was designed, not so much to fit closely to the figure as to follow its lines truthfully, and the only ornament which it boasted was the jewelled girdle which fastened it. It had an air, intentioned, in all likelihood, and probably entirely deceptive, of having no other fastening. This, and the condition that it imposed that it must be worn without stays, had slightly alarmed Ann — offended her even; and it was, perhaps, the perception of the real cause of her demurrings that, half whimsically, half maliciously, had determined her husband to buy it for her. She had pleaded the number of her dresses. She could not keep pace with them — could not wear all she had before they went out of fashion. She should have one dress, he declared, which would never be out of fashion. But, going back to her first argument, when could she wear it? — not dining out, not at a party, and it would be

ridiculous to wear a dress of the sort when she was alone. Oh, the occasion would come, he said, and — moved to prophecy — so, mark him, would the day of such clothing!

"The vision of all you women is so distorted by what fashion decrees for you that you don't know a beautiful thing when you see it."

Ann had not denied that the dress was beautiful. The point at issue at the obstinate moment was whether it would be of use to her.

The dress was bought. Ann, perhaps to her later regret, never wore it. Was it by chance that Branton that very day had unearthed it, and had gone into ecstasies over it? Ann had told her to put it away again, but had found it laid out on the great Empire bed when she went up to dress.

Branton's deprecating but venturesome smile showed that she expected a tussle. Branton had had all her pleas ready. Such a shame to keep something so exquisite shut away. So exactly the thing for a little intimate dinner; so precisely enough, so to speak, and yet, with just the long string of pearls, not too much. Such a Picture. Really she, Branton, would like Mrs. Nanson to see her lady in this. And the occasion might not occur again — so exactly the occasion.

Ann was conscious that her frown faltered, lost conviction. She was wavering. It was, perhaps, Branton's chance word, evoking memories. It was, perhaps, the memories themselves; one memory

woke another. It was the knowledge that her husband, though she had not worn it for him, would not have 'minded.' Was she near to understanding him? Had he found it in him sometimes to wish her awake even if it should be for a lover? But it was chiefly because she herself was changed from the Ann who had demurred, and because she had driven through Fotheringham, — though she would not have admitted this! — and always and always, because she had walked in a wood. She suffered Branton to array her in the garment of dispute.

When had her husband's taste ever been at fault? Might she not have trusted him? The dress was the beautiful Adam library as all her other dresses were the pretty rubbishy boudoir. The one fly in the ointment was Branton's rapture. That Branton's instinct should have been so sure! She could have wished that Branton, her desire attained, should have been disappointed, should have found the dress, after all, too simple, that only she herself should have seen its perfection. But Branton, with the eye for effect of a born lady's-maid, had seen, even as her husband with his trained eye for beauty had seen, and it had been Branton's mistress who had doubted.

"Yes, it looks very nice," Ann said. "It will do very well."

"Well, if that's all you've to say for it, 'm!" was Branton's inward comment.

But, inwardly also, Ann had more to say for it than that. Her surrender was complete. She wished that her husband could have known. She paused before a looking-glass on her way down and surveyed herself. She knew that 'different' as she looked she had never looked better. How different she looked and yet in one way how little different! It was as if, under the artificialities of her normal dressing, this was what she had always been like. She would go back, of course, to the pretty, fussy clothes again — the clothes of which you could never cease to be conscious yourself and to impress consciousness on others — but it was very good for once to have this delightful sense of freedom, and of a different grace.

It was a warm evening, and the windows of the smaller drawing-room, where she had decided that they should sit that night, were open to the fragrant garden. She was down first, and she stepped out on to the terrace, where presently Claudia joined her. If she had had any misgivings as to her appearance, — which, indeed, she had not, — they must have been laid by Claudia's little cry of delight.

"Ann, Ann," Claudia said, buzzing round her, "where did you get it? What artist conceived it? Paris! Ah, where else? Worth! Ah, who but he could have dreamt of it?"

She made little purring sounds.

"It's the plainness of it — the almost severe sim-

plicity. The way it falls and clings. How tall you are! I did n't know how tall. You 're like the young queen in a fairy story — the beautiful Queen who was loved by the Forester who dared not speak. Or, somehow, though I know she would n't have dressed a bit like that, the Sultan's daughter, Ann, — the wondrous-lovely Sultan's daughter who came to the Fountain. Is there a young Slave, Ann, who daily at the hour of evening . . . ? Is there a forester who must not speak? a young slave who must die?"

"Claudia, how your tongue runs away with you."

"Ann, do you know what an adorable creature you are?"

"Come along in," Ann said, but not quite steadily, her eyes suddenly misty.

Almost as they entered by the window, Whipple opened the door and announced, "Mr. Coram."

Why, as she saw him, did she know that this evening was to be different from any other evening on which he had dined at Redmayne? She saw that the change in her appearance did not escape him, though there was nothing in his demeanour to show that he had perceived it. As she advanced to meet him she had a curious feeling, half apprehensive, half expectant, as if, indeed, there was something different in this occasion from any other that she had known. Was it partly that she anticipated the news that she was to hear that night — divined that it was that night that she was to hear it? Or was it something more than this? — a premonition of what

was to happen to her? A premonition, at least, that something would happen to her?

Outwardly she was greeting him with her quiet smile and introducing him to Claudia.

"Only ourselves, you see," Ann said, — "not a party."

"I'm glad of that," Coram said. "I don't like parties."

Ann challenged that.

"Mr. Coram dines out oftener in six months than I do in a year," she said to Claudia.

"All the same," Coram said, "I'm glad this is n't a party — that it is n't a party to-night."

He did not say why, but Ann, dreading anything that should confirm her feeling that this evening was not as other evenings, had turned to Claudia and was settling a locket which hung from a slender chain about her neck.

"It will slip round," Claudia said.

Dinner was announced a moment or two later, and the three made their way to the dining-room.

Claudia now began to talk. Perhaps she divined Ann's apprehension. It was apprehension, now, that was uppermost. Coram was inclined to be silent; possibly even Ann herself. But Claudia talked — always without appearing to do the talking, and presently the others found their tongues. Ann was grateful to her.

Claudia at close quarters with Coram wondered less than ever. Ann, though she should decide to

tell her, had nothing to tell her now. The wonder was that the inevitable should not have occurred before. She was watching him also, though her smiling eyes when she was animated, and her drooping eyes when the moments came at which she went through her transparent little widowednesses, did not appear to watch. She had, as we know, jumped to her conclusion at the window of the boudoir the evening before. Nothing that he did or did not do but fitted in with that. If he looked at Ann it was because . . . If he did not look at her, but kept his eyes fixed on his plate or on her, Claudia Nanson, or on anything or any one else, it was equally because . . . If he talked or did not talk, it was because . . . Above all, it was Because, if he ever was shy; and we know that Timothy, with everything to make him bold, could be shy. Claudia saw confirmation everywhere; may have wished to see it; but really believed that she saw it. Before the fish was over, Claudia was quite, quite certain. If Ann did not tell her, she, greatly daring, would tell Ann.

And Ann looked superb to-night. What man but must adore her? As what woman, indeed, but must know that she could not with perfect safety, without the risk, that is, of after-smartings or achings, let or hope to let an eye rest softly on Timothy Coram? The two were marked out by nature for each other, set apart, proclaimed. Oh, if she had been Ann, if she, just pretty as she was, with no pretensions to anything but fluffiness and femininenes and wiles

— if she had been Ann, she would have known what to do . . .

The servants moved silently with dishes or decanters. The wines sparkled in the glasses. Napery and silver shone in the light of the candles. The heavy curtains were not yet drawn. The roses outside the windows sent perfumed messages to their brothers and sisters on the table — the free roses outside to the captive roses within. There was a sky of a blue that was almost green, — deep, luminous, crystal-clear, — and in it, from where she sat, Claudia could see one star.

"If I could get them out," she thought to herself. "If I could get them walking under a sky like that."

Aloud she said — talking, though it might be (and she knew it), of boots: "It's the wonderful way your days melt into nights — your days here in England, I mean, — mine, too, I suppose I may say, now that I hope I have done with the East and with travelling."

Ann looked at her quickly. Was it Claudia who was going to precipitate what she knew — knew in her bones — that she was to hear! She looked, as if for help, at Claudia's locket — Claudia's locket by which she had, she believed, diverted the talk from dangerous channels at the beginning of the evening. By chance it had turned itself round again on its swivel and lay with its setting of pearls, instead of its smooth oval back, against Claudia's neck.

But Coram was speaking.

"You don't like the East?"

"I'm very glad to have been there. But, oh, I'm so glad to be home."

It was the right note, and Ann breathed again. Claudia at the same moment felt her locket and turned it. Claudia steered clear for the night.

"Look," she said; "the long, long twilight and then this," she nodded towards the star. "Could one say to-night when the twilight ended? Might n't we sit out after dinner, Ann?"

"There's no dew," Coram said. "The grass was as dry as a bone as I walked here."

Ann heard herself saying that certainly they would sit out. She looked at the sky and the single star as she spoke, and she sent a thought piercing its way through the thicknesses and darknesses of the wood to the lonely figure sitting in the dusk. It was a night for out-of-doors, a night, when the moon should have risen, for such a pilgrimage as that upon which she had despatched her thought.

She gave directions about the placing of the chairs.

But the silences would fall, though Claudia talked never so gaily, and though Ann was far too good a hostess ever really to lose control of the moment. She bowed, not to any supineness or to any lack of initiative, but to the differentness which insisted on marking the evening. Something hung over it — a threat or a portent. It had the sense

of finality of last things — last meetings, last actions, last words. It had the quality of seeming to make memories. She could conceive saying of it to one of the other two in the remote future, "Do you remember how we did this or that that night? How we often sat silent, and how then one or other of us talked just to fill up, or to keep the ball rolling, and how sometimes we left long gaps unfilled, or let the ball lie quite still. Do you remember how strange it all felt? — or was it, perhaps, only to me that everything felt strange? And was that my gown, do you think? Do you remember I wore an odd gown that Vincent insisted on buying for me years before? Do you remember that I wore it that night?" Or, "Do you remember a locket you wore, Claudia?" — or, "that Claudia Nanson wore! — and that it would turn round?" Or she could conceive of it as a mark in time — as a date by which you remembered other things, things antecedent or subsequent to itself. But she did not yet conceive of it as a gulf — a gulf dividing all that had gone before from all that was to follow after.

Coram's announcement came when the servants had put the wine on the table and had closed the door behind them.

He had had his telegram. He was going. He was going to-morrow.

Ann had known that his going when he went would be sudden.

"And that," he said, looking at Ann and then looking quickly down, and speaking huskily — "that's what's the matter with me."

Ann's eyes did not falter, her hands which were clasped across her breast did not tremble. It was Coram's hands that trembled. He put down a peach which he had taken absently, and the knife with which he had been as absently peeling it, and pushed back his chair a little.

Claudia made an involuntary movement.

He turned to her.

"I ought to apologize to you," he said; "I ought to apologize to you both for — for being such a wet-blanket at the feast," he picked his words with difficulty, knowing that he was floundering. "I — I just have n't been able to help it."

"Oh," Claudia murmured vaguely, "no, no," and, "Of course, I understand."

"Thirteen years, Mrs. Nanson," he said. "It's a good slice of one's life."

"Thirteen years," Ann said. "Is it thirteen years?"

She felt as if her mind was wandering. Thirteen or thirty was it? So much or so little! What did it matter how long or how short the period was, since it was over?

"I got the telegram a couple of hours ago; I found it when I got home. It had been waiting for me."

He turned again to Claudia and explained briefly

to her, in a sort of parenthesis, what had caused the delays and uncertainties which had come to an end so abruptly; and turned then to Ann. She could hardly attend to what he was saying. She gathered that his friend had but that morning succeeded in settling his affairs. The stock or shares, or whatever they were, had touched the point, or whatever it was, for which he had been waiting, and he was free. Coram, who by agreement with him, as of course with Ann herself, had been holding himself ready to start at a moment's notice, was to join him the next day in London for the final arrangements. Unless anything unforeseen happened to prevent them, they proposed to sail the day after. Ann had known long since that he was going to America, first. Berths, it seemed, were available in the Celtic.

She was not listening. She was watching Coram's face, and Claudia's, and the way that the light threw shadows.

"But even now," Coram said, "if you would rather that I waited — that I put off, anyway, for a week, or two —"

"Of course, you must n't put off going," Ann said. "I would n't hear of it. I need n't tell you again that we shall miss you — the tenants, your friends, all of us. But there's nothing in the way of your going but our reluctance to part with you, and that is purely selfish. You must go, Mr. Coram."

Claudia now said, "Ann, you and Mr. Coram will

have things you want to discuss. Let me leave you for a little and join you later."

But Ann shook her head.

"No," she said; "that's all been done. Everything is settled. I have been waiting for this telegram as actually as Mr. Coram himself. I knew it would come suddenly. That is in the nature of a telegram, is n't it? Shall we go into the garden? But you 'll have some more wine, Mr. Coram. Will you follow us?"

"May n't I come with you?" Coram said.

They rose, and as they left the room Ann laid a light but restraining hand on Claudia's arm.

And in the garden Ann contrived to keep Claudia near her. Twice Claudia attempted to escape, and twice Ann anticipated her intention and thwarted it: once by involving her with the tea-things which had been brought out to a table which had been placed in readiness for them — 'Pour out for me like a good woman' — and once, as before, by the light but restraining hand on her arm. Why she did this she could not have said. Was she afraid to be alone with Coram? — afraid for the very ardour of her wish to be alone with him? As the darkness fell, secure moreover in the presence of Claudia, she allowed her eyes to rest upon him. She was in shadow; he, just touched by the light from the drawing-room window behind her. Claudia from where she sat could not see her face, but Ann's hand

rested on the wicker arm of her chair. Presently she felt Claudia's hand take hers. She knew that Claudia was trying to communicate with her, but she ignored her intention. Owls were hooting softly. A bat skimmed by sometimes. There was a night-jar somewhere.

"So I was glad, you see, that this was n't a dinner party," Coram said.

"I think I knew what you meant when you said that," Ann said. She was, at least, quite certain of her voice. "I think I knew then that you had come to tell me that you were going."

She could risk that, too. She might show, even to repetition, that she was sorry that he was going. She had only not to show how sorry.

He, with nothing to conceal, showed quite plainly how sorry he was to go.

So they talked and did not talk. A numbness began to creep over Ann. The moments were slipping by. Was she feeling anything? — feeling anything really? She had felt more than this, felt far more than this, when she knew only that the day was coming when he would go. Now the day had come and the last moments when she could still see him and speak to him and touch him were slipping away. Presently he would make a move. She had heard ten o'clock strike in the drawing-room, and now the clock was striking again. It was eleven o'clock. They had sat out two hours! Two hours! It seemed impossible, but also it seemed as if, in this warm

night, a very lifetime of hours had passed and was passing.

And they had said all that there seemed to say, and they had said nothing, and there was nothing to say. And presently he would go.

She began to wish that he would go. At length he rose. Perhaps because his feelings were acute he became formal. He would have an early start in the morning. He had got some of his packing to do. He had to leave a note for Bulkley before he went home.

Ann thought: "I'm not wanting to delay you. Goodness knows I don't want to delay you. Go. Go. Please go."

In spite of herself her manner became cold. She saw Claudia look at her.

Then everything went awry, got out of hand, missed fire. She had a feeling of looking on helplessly at herself as she said last words to him. She might have been saying polite things to a visitor.

She said, "Could n't I send your note for you?" — Mr. Bulkley lodged in the village, a mile beyond Redmayne. "It's so out of your way. You'll be so late before you get home and you've got to pack."

"Not if I go by the path and come back this way. Besides, if I find him up, I'd like a word with him."

"Yes, perhaps you may find him up," Ann said.

She could not help herself. Claudia showed more warmth than she.

"Good-bye, Mr. Coram," Claudia said. "*Bon voyage*, and all the very, very best wishes."

She did manage to slip away then. But there were the servants to say good-bye to, and she doubted now whether Ann and he would see each other for a moment alone. As she went upstairs she heard him taking leave of Whipple, and of Mrs. Piper, who had come from the housekeeper's room to wish him godspeed. She heard their regrets and their fervent good wishes.

"All but Ann," she said to herself; "all but Ann."

She meant that every one showed feeling but Ann.

Ten minutes later she was speaking.

"Ann, Ann, Ann," was what she said when she had drawn a ghostlike Ann into her room, an Ann who was wide-eyed, and whose teeth were chattering. "Ann, can't you see?"

"Can't I see what?" Ann said dully.

"Wait," Claudia said. "May I send Branton to bed?"

"Yes," Ann said. "Tell her I shan't want her. But why? Why?"

She seemed glad that Claudia should have thought of that.

Claudia sped from the room.

When a moment or two later she came back, she found Ann standing just inside the door and exactly as she had left her. Ann looked at her enquiringly.

"Can't I see what?" she repeated, as if there had been no interruption. "Can't I see what, Claudia?"

"You would n't let me go," Claudia said. "I tried. You knew I was trying. You were horrid to him. You said good-bye to him as if he had been going away for the week-end. You can't let him go like that. You can't. Is it possible that you don't know — is it possible that you can't see why he's going?"

They looked at each other.

Claudia nodded.

"It's as plain as a pikestaff," she said; "and he's not going for any silly or romantic reasons, either. He's entirely matter-of-fact. He's in love with you and he thinks it would n't Do. Just that. But he's going because he's in love with you."

"Claudia, if I thought you were right!"

It was no ghostlike Ann who said that.

And Claudia was so certain that she was right, and the moment was big with reaction, and Coram would pass through the garden on his way home. . . .

So it came that to Coram, in an unusual mood, strung up already by the emotions of the strange evening, excited, aching, even, there appeared out of the shadow of the darkened and silent house the surprising sight of the trembling Ann. He came near to her. Each was mistaken. She, of her want of knowledge, of her very innocence; he, of what his experiences had taught him. She stumbled forward. She was near fainting. She had miscalculated her strength, but his natural tenderness would, anyway,

have disarmed her. And he, utterly misapprehending, proud, but very humble also, as one to whom some amazing honour has unexpectedly been done, knew only one way of dealing with a woman whom he found in his arms.

Not a hundred words were spoken. Ann always remembered that she had seen tears in his eyes.

THE SECOND BOOK

BOOK THE SECOND

CHAPTER I

WHEN Ann found that Timothy Coram had gone, that the night before had had no effect upon his plans, — plans which he had been speaking of only an hour earlier as alterable, if need be, even then, — the world seemed like to collapse about her ears.

"Even now," she could hear him say, — "even now if you would rather that I waited — that I put off, anyway for a week or two . . ."

And that was before — while as yet what had happened had been unthought of, inconceivable even. And the inconceivable had become, not the conceivable only, but the inevitable, the natural consequence, the accomplished; and he was gone! She could not at first believe her ears.

She had taken it so completely for granted that he would not go — believed, indeed, behind that, that now he would not go at all. All the morning she had expected him. No doubt of him had entered her mind, as no doubt of him had had any part soever in such misgivings as had occasionally, but then only momentarily, stirred under her happiness in the rest of the short summer night. She had lain quite, quite still in the silence and the darkness thinking her long, long thoughts. Only towards

dawn had she slept, and then she had awakened early to happy waking dreams.

She stole from her room to Claudia's, before the servants were moving, to kiss her and to be held for a few moments in Claudia's arms. She told her nothing. Claudia asked her nothing. There seemed no need of words between them. A few hours later they had met at breakfast, radiant, confident, expectant, and at peace.

And Claudia had really been wonderful. She was 'there' all the time — just 'there' if Ann should want her; and Ann, humming from sheer gladness of heart and unbounded, unquestioning faith, had waited contentedly for the sight of Coram himself, or for Whipple to come and tell her that he was in the library. For very happiness she could settle to nothing. Claudia wrote letters in the boudoir. Ann looked in upon her from time to time, knowing that she would not be questioned, and Claudia did not look up, or looked up and smiled, and talked of nothing nearer to the thoughts of either of them than Shakespeare, say, and the musical glasses. In other words, Claudia showed herself to be all that a confidante — a confidante, moreover, who in a sense had not yet even been confided in — should be. Ann was unspeakably grateful to her. But the hours passed.

At twelve o'clock, Ann, still quite easy, had drawn Claudia from her letters to play croquet. For a time the game held her — the odd, wide-hooped, short-

malleted game of those days, with its delicious croquetings, one foot on your own ball, a thrill for you in the click which sent your opponent's ball rolling away, leaving your own, of course, steady! — and its double hoop in the middle — a bell even to tinkle your satisfaction when you had successfully engineered it! For a time she played steadily, able, in spite of her preoccupation, to take an interest in what she was doing. But presently her interest began to flag. She would forget her turn. Claudia would have to say, "Black to play," or, "Blue to play," as the case might be. Once Claudia saw her play with yellow, and when she saw that she was unconscious of her mistake did not draw her attention to it. It did not seem expedient or even worth while. Ann noticed nothing even when Claudia played with the ball which she had herself just struck. It was then, however, that Claudia began to be uneasy.

Ann looked at her watch.

"Shall we stop?" Ann said. "We can finish the game after luncheon."

"Yes," Claudia said, — "any time," thinking that it was, indeed, the sort of game that need not be finished at all.

"The sun is so hot," Ann said. But she did not move out of the sun.

"I think I'll finish my letters."

"Oh, need you?" Ann said. "The post does n't go till six."

No, Claudia said, there was no hurry.

She was ready to do whatever might be required of her. Walk or talk or make herself scarce. What did Ann want? Impossible to say, when it became manifest — as now began to happen rapidly — that Ann did not know herself what she wanted. She was waiting for something or some one; so much was clear.

They loitered in the garden. Presently Ann went in. Claudia, left to herself, wandered down one of the paths. Five minutes had not passed before she saw that Ann had come out again.

What ailed her?

She had come out through the drawing-room window, and was standing now where they had sat the evening before. At the distance from which she observed her Claudia could not see her face, but something in her attitude filled her with disquietude.

At luncheon Ann made hardly a pretence of eating. Claudia, rather hungry herself, curbed her inclinations, to cover as far as might be her hostess's lack of appetite. She would have liked another cutlet, but nobly said, "No, thank you," at the sight of Ann's relinquished knife and fork. But as luncheon came to an end Ann brightened. It was as if new hope had come to her. One period was over, another beginning. There was, she might have been thinking, all the afternoon . . .

"You would like to drive," she said, "would n't

you? I think, if you won't mind going alone, that I won't go out this afternoon. Have you any shopping to do, or would you like just a drive?"

Claudia bethought her of this and of that that she wanted.

"But you're not ordering the carriage to entertain me, are you? You know, don't you, that I have n't got to be 'entertained'?"

"No," Ann said, smiling. "Go for a drive. We'll finish our game of croquet after tea."

So at half-past three o'clock, though by that time there were signs that Ann's restlessness was returning, Claudia mounted into the great Redmayne barouche and went for her drive.

In truth, Ann's restlessness was returning. She was looking, as Claudia had divined, to the afternoon to make up for the surprising disappointment of the morning. A hundred things might have happened to hinder Coram from coming to her earlier. The very change in his plans — she had still no doubt about that — made it impossible that he should come to her before luncheon. He had had to communicate with his friend. Telegrams probably had been passing between them all the morning. And he would have had to see Mr. Bulkley — for whom, by the way, since his promotion would now at least be postponed, she must see that satisfactory arrangements were made. Easy enough to account for the

morning. But three o'clock had come and gone; a quarter-past three; half-past. Would the afternoon pass like the morning?

It was at a little after four that she saw Whipple crossing the lawn towards her. Her heart bounded at the sight she had been awaiting all day, and it was with difficulty that she prevented herself from going to meet him. If she had moved she must have run towards him. She sat still — trembling if he could have seen — watching his approach. How slowly he came! She watched the rise and fall of his deliberate feet. He shaded his eyes from the sun with one hand. Could he not speak from where he was — speak as he came, and so save time? But he was too well-bred a servant to speak till he was quite near. He need not speak at all if he only knew. She was so sure that she knew what he was going to say. There was only one thing that he could have to say. Now he judged himself near enough. He was, as it were, in the presence.

"Mr. Bulkley to see you, 'm. He is in the library."

So prepared had she been for what she had expected to hear, that for a moment she did not observe that what she had expected was not what he had said.

"Very well, Whipple. Tell Mr. —" She got as far as that. She broke off.

"Mr. Who?"

"Mr. Bulkley, 'm."

"You mean Mr. —"

"Yes, 'm, Mr. Bulkley."

She looked at him still as if she had not heard aright.

"Oh, Mr. Bulkley," she said at last.

Whipple, who was waiting, said, "Yes, 'm," again.

"Tell Mr. Bulkley I will be with him in a moment."

She sat still then, watching Whipple retrace his deliberate steps. This time she saw that he shaded the back of his head.

"Mr. Bulkley?" she said to herself. "Mr. Bulkley?"

It was not for a moment or two after she had greeted him, and they had sat down, that Ann realized the purport of his visit. This was his formal call upon taking office — a shaking hands, as it were, upon his appointment.

He may have wondered at a little sudden movement that she made. It was with difficulty that she kept a 'But' from an enquiry which yet took the form of an exclamation.

"Mr. Coram?"

"He went by the ten o'clock train."

The 'But' came from her now, detached; it began a sentence which never was finished.

"Oh, you mean he went up to London."

"Yes, to London."

For a moment Ann had breathed again, but Bulkley had not finished.

"He had the narrowest shave of missing his train. I saw him off. It was in the station when we drove up. He was delayed, you see, at the starting."

"Delayed?" Ann said.

"Such a lot of them to say good-bye to. I don't know how so many of the tenants had time to know that he was going this morning — it was all so hurried and sudden. But they had known for some days that he might be going at any moment, and I suppose news got round last night that he had got his telegram."

Perhaps what Ann's face showed seemed bewilderment, for Bulkley now said: "You knew, Mrs. Forrester, did n't you?"

"Oh, yes," Ann heard herself answering. "I knew. Mr. Coram was dining here last night."

"I only knew this morning," Bulkley said. "He had left a note for me last night, but I was in bed and he had n't knocked me up. However, I got it at seven this morning, and I was round with him by half-past eight."

He was gone, then.

But he could n't be gone — could n't really be gone.

Mr. Bulkley thought he was gone, but he was n't. There was some explanation even if he had let them all think he was gone, even if, as he seemed to have done, he had taken his luggage! She fought with

herself for that. Well, then, he had gone up to London, prepared to go if he must, but he knew in his heart that he no longer intended to go and he would be back the next day.

But Bulkley's next words shattered even that.

"Yes," he said, "an awful rush at the end. He left a portmanteau behind him, after all. I've just had a telegram from him from London. I'm to send it to Liverpool."

What Ann felt was a sort of stupefaction. Through it she heard herself and Mr. Bulkley talk on. Though she herself was numb, she seemed to have two or three minds which were able to occupy themselves in separate ways at the same moment. With one of them she talked and listened, never losing sense of what she said. With another she was thinking that Whipple should have shown Mr. Bulkley into the drawing-room and not the library. This was, as she had divined, a visit of ceremony. With yet another she was living through every moment of the night before. Yet, spiritually, sensation was suspended. She was not consciously suffering now.

Mr. Bulkley presently rose to go. Ann asked him to stay for tea, but he excused himself on the ground of business that he had to see to, and, uncertain how long her immunity might last, she did not press him.

Only as he was saying good-bye did he make any allusion to the change brought about in his own circumstances by Coram's departure.

"I hope I shall deserve the confidence you have shown in me," he said. "I want to say, but I can't say, how I appreciate it, and how I appreciate being allowed even to follow a man like Coram."

That brought it home to her — a touch of emotion in some one else's voice. Coram was gone.

CHAPTER II

CLAUDIA, uneasy as she was, enjoyed her drive. The day, despite the absence of dew the night before, which might have been supposed to presage rain, was perfect. Impossible not to enjoy so balmy an air and such radiant sunshine. Impossible, too, if you were Claudia, not to enjoy sitting back amongst the cushions of the roomy carriage, and, even if as yet there was no one to see you, feeling how very important you looked. She allowed herself to yield to the pleasant influences of the hour. Very soon these had their own influence on her spirits, and, though she was always conscious of an uneasiness under her ease, she was able to keep it in its place. All would be well. All would assuredly be well. When she got home she would find that — that — well, whatever Ann had been hoping for or expecting had happened. If Ann, as she could not but suppose, had had reason to believe that Mr. Coram would have put off his departure, and it was thus a visit from him that she had been looking for, Claudia would hear on her return from her drive that he had called. If it was a letter that Ann awaited, she would find that the letter had come. All would be well. She was quite sure of it. It would be good to hear that all was well. Meanwhile it was very delightful in the big, soft, smooth-rolling carriage. All its

appointments pleased her. So did the comfortable servants in their imposing liveries on the box. So, as we may know by this time, did her own mourning appearance.

Her thoughts, to the tune of the even trotting of the horses and the subdued rumble of the wheels, played gently round Ann's romance as she conceived it, and round her own share in it. She could not but know that, whatever check had come with the passing of the morning which had begun so rosily, she had helped Ann the night before. She could only guess at what had occurred after her outburst. But for her "Ann, Ann, Ann," Coram, hero meet for any romance, would have departed — would have been allowed to depart — in silence. Ann owed her the happiness which had transfigured the face which had bent over her in the early, early hours. Her own face glowed in the recollection of that wordless embrace. Could one, looking at Ann, have guessed that she was capable of such depths of feeling? He probably had not guessed. The key to the whole situation lay there. Ann, ghostlike, wide-eyed, shivering . . . Ann, beaming, radiant, brimming . . . could one have imagined? She let herself construct a picture of what had taken place. Easy to do this from her knowledge of the state of mind of one of the actors (yes, knowledge) — had not Ann let her see? — could she, Claudia, have avoided seeing? — and from her certainty (yes, certainty, certainty!) of the state of mind of the

other. The very beauty of the starlit night helped her. Had she not earlier in the evening said to herself, "If I could get them out — if I could get them out walking under such a sky!"? And that was what she had done. The one star had long since given place to many stars. While as yet they were all three sitting out in front of the drawing-room windows, the night had been athrob with stars. It had gained in beauty without losing what the one star had seemed to give it. The night might be counted on to have done its part. She could see Coram striding back. She could think of him as glancing at the spot where that deadliness of constraint had come over him when he had risen to go half an hour before, paralyzing his tongue, turning his last words to foolishness and his last moments to torment.

And she could see Ann waiting, trembling, moving forward . . .

We know how nearly the picture approached to truth. But the picture remained unfinished. Beyond that point — the moving forward of Ann — she could not see.

The carriage was approaching Windlestone. The country roads, dotted with an occasional cottage or farmstead, assumed a more urban aspect. Hoardings began to be seen. Ginnett's Circus was Coming; ladies flying through hoops, or over broad streamers manipulated by grimacing clowns, announced that.

Claudia read in passing that the Procession would be a Mile Long — and spaced it for herself! "A Woman of the People" held the theatre. Dingier posters, torn now and flapping, or partly pasted over, showed that at some more or less recent date Wombwell's Menagerie had paid its visit to this town. A Panorama of the Holy Land was at the Assembly Rooms. These announcements, with others, made the approaches to the town ugly but interesting. So did the small shops that now began to appear; so did the people who paused to look at the carriage as it passed; so did the busyish railway station.

Now they were in the town itself — a delightful old town once you were fairly in it — and Charles was turning for directions. Claudia had to think of what she wanted — a glass for her watch.

"Parless's" — Charles to Fenton. "Parless's, 'm, in the High Street" — Charles to Claudia.

A bareheaded young man, and then Mr. Parless himself, bareheaded also and bowing, came out to the carriage.

A few moments. A few moments, at the outside. Yes, these glasses broke so easily. Then the pleasant little waiting while the fitting was done; passers-by loitering or turning to look at you. Then the young man again with the watch in silver paper, and the trifling account, and Mr. Parless again bowing.

The weather was very seasonable, and Mrs. Forrester was quite well, thank you. No, not in London

this year. Yes, Claudia agreed, it often did seem a pity to go to London at the time of year when the country was so agreeable. No, that was all, thank you. Good-afternoon from the bowing shop-keeper and good-day from the lady.

The post-office. Only stamps there, and those Charles could buy for her. Twenty-four penny and twelve halfpenny. The pleasant important waiting again. It was very like having carriages and horses and menservants of your own. Yes, Claudia was enjoying herself.

Charles again waiting for orders, all attention and deference.

But now Claudia had to think of something to want. Oh, well, you always wanted thread for your work, and you always wanted new patterns.

A draper's? Elbow and Clinton's in Park Square. No, not, Claudia thought, a draper's exactly. A shop where needlework was sold; materials for needlework.

"Oh, Miss Blondin's, 'm. The Berlin Wool Shop."

That had the right sound.

"Yes, Miss Blondin's," said Claudia.

The Berlin Wool Shop, Miss Blondin's, — Miss Blondin in full over the door, — was in Rochester Street, the oldest part of the town. Claudia, entering Miss Blondin's, and received by the great Miss Blondin herself, had almost forgotten her uneasiness. The atmosphere of Miss Blondin's, everything contributing — the names, the fanlights, the

round windows — was so exactly in keeping with the spirit of her fondest imaginings of what shopping should be in a country town, that all that was disturbing was put from her mind. Miss Blondin might have stepped out of Cranford.

She must have seen the Redmayne liveries from the window, for Claudia had not been a minute in the shop before she contrived to let her know that Mrs. Forrester was one of her most valued customers. Claudia bought her modest threads and proceeded to the fascinating inspection of the patterns. Enthralling to Claudia, who loved needlework, every faint blue tracing.

"Sweetly pretty are they not, 'm?" said Miss Blondin.

"Entrancing," said Claudia.

"Such variety," said Miss Blondin, "in the designs. They get prettier, I think, with every fresh batch. These came in only last week. That one, now. A sort of Empire design. Swans, you see, and garlands, and laurel wreaths. Oh, no, 'm, not really difficult. The instructions printed, you see, on the wrapper, and quite easy to follow. Miss Dousley."

"Yes, Miss Blondin."

"You have the Swan design begun, I think. I should like to show this lady . . ."

Miss Dousley fetched the Swan design begun.

"We keep some of these started," Miss Blondin explained in parenthesis. "Now, Miss Dousley."

Miss Dousley demonstrated.

"The double loop, 'm, — that's where you have to be careful. Watch me. So, 'm. The knot completing the stitch, as it were."

"I see," said Claudia — "or I think I see. Yes, I do see. May I try?"

She took off her gloves. The rings sparkled on her white hands.

"Oh, the hands for the needlework!" said Miss Blondin. "The hands for the tambour, or, better still, the lace cushion! Am I not right, Miss Dousley? I yet hope to live to see a revival of lace-making. What more exquisite sight than the play of the hands on the lace cushion?"

Ann was forgotten; all Claudia's uneasiness. Claudia bought the Swan design, and a design of roses and love-knots, and one in which arabesques entwined themselves a little incongruously about the severer chastities of the Greek key. Beguiled by Miss Blondin she bought a tambour frame, but drew the line at the lace cushion — if, indeed, Miss Blondin had one for sale. There was, to be sure, the big Honiton cushion under its glass shade in one of the round windows, but that, of course, was there as a symbol of the shop's intention. Miss Blondin did business in Windlestone, it might be said, At the Sign of the Lace Cushion.

"No wools or silks or crochet hooks to-day, 'm? These tea-cloths are pretty. Yes, drawn thread. Nor d'oyleys for painting in water colour? Autumn

leaves, 'm, as you see, and this one a sprig of myrtle."

Claudia, putting on her gloves, shook her head, smiling. "Not to-day, thank you."

"Allow me, 'm."

It was Miss Dousley, returning with the bill and her change, begging permission to button her gloves. The parcel was taken out to the carriage.

Claudia rose.

It was then that Miss Blondin, as Mr. Parless before her, asked for Mrs. Forrester. She went on to speak of Redmayne. Such a beautiful place, she had always thought, when she had been privileged to see it. She had been there two or three times in connection with the repair of some of the old chair covers and embroideries. She had been to the Grand Bazaar which had been held in the Grounds (the capitals unmistakable in the reverence of Miss Blondin's inflections) some years back — in aid of the Cottage Hospital, *that* was — and she had been there once even as a Guest.

"But that was on a very sad occasion — the occasion of the lamented Mr. Forrester's funeral, when I, in conjunction with one or two others in Windlestone who had had the honour of serving the family, was favoured with an invitation."

It was all perfect — all so exactly in key. How much she was enjoying herself! Her own becoming crapes and lawns made the mention of a funeral — and somehow of a funeral in inferred relation to

its importance! — so appropriate. The talk was of Ann, of the concerns of Ann, anyway, but at that moment she had forgotten her.

"Mr. Coram will be missed, 'm, will he not?"

Claudia, who had sighed and nodded and was now at the door, stopped abruptly.

"We were all so sorry to hear he was going. Oh, we all knew Mr. Coram in Windlestone. Off round the world, too! The Grand Tour, as I used to hear it called by old people when I was young. This morning, too! We all hoped it might not be so soon."

That morning! He was gone, then! There seemed no doubt of it. Miss Blondin had heard even that he had nearly missed his train. Mr. Bulkley had seen him off. The platform waving to him. So popular he was. So beloved by every one. There would be sore hearts, too, Miss Blondin dared say! Such a favourite, so to speak, with the ladies. But there, Miss Blondin must n't say too much. Such a favourite with every one, young and old. Half the town would have turned out to see the last of him if the hour of his departure could have been known in time.

It was a conscience-stricken Claudia who took her seat once more in the great Redmayne carriage and said, "Home," to the waiting Charles. Something almost approaching to remorse had part in her abounding dismay. It was as if, while she had

been occupying herself with fripperies, vanities, idlenesses, things, and states of mind of no moment or value, another, unheeded, had been receiving a life-sentence or a death-blow. The knowledge that she was exaggerating, that it was not, nor could be, as bad as all that, availed her nothing just then, partly because she was Claudia and had to exaggerate, but chiefly because of the uneasiness which, all through, had underlain her selfish enjoyment. The visions of the two Anns returned to her persistently. The Ann of last night, ghostlike, wide-eyed, with chattering teeth, and the Ann of the morning, beaming, radiant, brimming . . . she did not know — or did she know? — which smote her with the more pity. It was the thought, anyway, of the second Ann, that filled her eyes with sudden tears.

And the day itself was changing. The unfaltering sunshine had faltered. Clouds had come up from nowhere, and a breeze with the chill of approaching rain in it was fluttering her veils and draperies.

CHAPTER III

ANN'S defences were down — though not wholly down even yet. She had to let Claudia see, if, for the servants, her indisposition could still be called a headache.

What it was actually called, in the message with which Claudia was greeted by the solicitous Whipple, was, of course, The headache. She had gone to her room with it, it seemed. Whipple thought that the sun was perhaps the cause.

Claudia closed on that as Ann upon the third magpie.

"Ah, yes," Claudia said. "Mrs. Forrester felt the sun this morning when she was playing croquet with me. She spoke of it."

And Mrs. Forrester had been out in the sun again in the afternoon. She had been sitting in the sun when Whipple had gone out to tell her that Mr. Bulkley had called. Yes, Mr. Bulkley had called — soon after four that would be. Whipple had not thought her looking quite herself then, though nothing to notice. It was about half an hour later that she had gone to her room to lie down.

"Mrs. Forrester begged that you would have tea without her, and hoped, perhaps, to be well enough to come down for dinner."

"Would she see me, do you think?"

Should Whipple ask Branton?

Yes, that would be best.

Branton was on her way down at that very moment. Mrs. Forrester had heard the carriage and had asked to see her. Would Mrs. Nanson be kind enough to step up when she had had her tea. Claudia wanted to 'step up' at once.

"Mrs. Forrester begged you would have your tea first, 'm."

Claudia submitted. Not many minutes later she was knocking at Ann's door.

Yes, the defences were down, not a doubt of that. Ann at that moment was past dissembling. It said something for Claudia's perceptions that, in the face of the surrender that she did see, she should have had even an inkling that the surrender was yet not complete. Ann was not crying. That frightened her. Ann's eyes said, "You know, so I have n't to tell you."

"You 'll hear from him," Claudia said when she could speak. "He may have had to go. It may n't have been possible to change his plans at a moment's notice . . ."

They had been made at a moment's notice, Ann was able to remind her.

"But he had pledged himself to that," Claudia pleaded. "He was to hold himself ready — was n't that the understanding? It may have been because of that. He would have had to see his friend."

Ann's own argument, which she had seen herself forced to reject.

"No, Claudia, he's gone. He has n't gone just to see anybody. He's gone."

"He has n't sailed yet, anyway," Claudia said gently.

Ann broke from her. She had not been lying down, Claudia saw. She could not lie down, could not surrender her driven body to any one position. She went over to the window and stood there with her back to Claudia.

"He'll sail to-morrow," she said in a strangled voice. "He is going to sail to-morrow. He has n't altered his plans. It's that. Last night has n't made any difference."

"Did n't he say anything?" Claudia said at last.

"No," Ann said. "He did n't say anything. It did n't even occur to me that he had n't said anything. And I did n't say anything either. It would n't have occurred to me to say anything about — about what I took so entirely for granted."

She stared out of the window drumming on the pane with her fingers.

A full minute passed in silence.

The threatened rain was beginning now. Claudia saw it and wished there might be a thunder-storm — anything to break the horrid stillness in which the drumming of Ann's fingers on the glass seemed suddenly to have been going on for hours. She wanted desperately to help Ann, but could not.

This tense, bitter suffering threw her back upon herself. If it had been a weeping Ann that she had had to deal with, she would have known what to do. She wondered now why Ann had sent for her.

Ann turned back from the window blankly. Something in the blankness of her face caught Claudia, as it were, by the throat. It was Claudia, to her own surprise, who burst into tears.

Ann's arms were round her in a moment.

Presently it was Ann who was crying, and Claudia was just Claudia enough even then to pat herself on the back for a cleverness that had been involuntary.

"Oh, Claudia, I'm so unhappy. I'm so horribly unhappy."

Claudia held her close. Little by little she grew able to talk.

"Nothing like this has ever happened to me before," was one of the sentences that came from her. "I care so dreadfully," was another. "Is caring for some one always as awful as this?" a third.

Claudia knew of such suffering; could understand it, even if, as she realized with a sort of little humbled feeling, she was incapable of experiencing it herself. It did not need this, however, to tell her that Ann was her superior — had a finer soul than she would ever have or even wish for. Claudia had no allusions about the plane upon which she lived and moved and had her being. Fripperies contented her, but she could appreciate the bigger things when

she saw them. Her love of Ann at the moment amounted to worship.

And she was able to help her. She helped her as perhaps no one else could have helped her just then. Whatever Claudia lacked, she had no lack of the rare sense we call common. The need of the moment was respite.

She worked for respite. She fixed Ann's thoughts upon the letter which was still to come. Till that came, everything was conjecture. If the letter failed, she knew herself to be done. But it could not fail. She had been shaken, it is true, by the news she had heard in the Berlin Wool Shop, but her faith in Coram, which was actually her faith in her own perception, — in what she so truly believed herself to have perceived, — had not suffered any appreciable damage. Coram's letter would put everything right even if he should still sail on the morrow. That he might intend to sail on the morrow had to be faced. She had to admit to herself, if not to Ann, that everything appeared to point to an unchanged intention of sailing on the morrow.

Till the coming of the letter, then. To the coming of the letter . . .

They got through the evening. Ann came down to dinner, pale, frail-looking even, but mistress once more of herself. They sat in the boudoir after dinner and Claudia managed to induce Ann to play bézique with her. For a time the game held her. Disturbing emotions were kept under by Royal or

Common Marriages, Fours of Aces or Kings or Queens or Knaves, the hope of Sequence and chance of Double Bézique. Ann gasped for her declarations when the opportunities of declaring declined at the approach of a last trick, or at such moments as demanded the sacrifice of one hoarded possession for another, and counted her tens as eagerly as Claudia. Up to a point. Then, as with the croquet that morning, her attention began to wander.

At that hour, the evening before, they had been sitting out on the terrace in front of the drawing-room windows. She could see Coram's face as the light just struck it. It came between her and the cards in her hand.

She gave a little movement and Claudia looked up.

"I can't go on."

"Yes, you can. And you're winning."

"Oh, Claudia, I can't."

"Yes, you can. I tell you you're winning. Play, Ann. It's you. Have you taken a card?"

Ann took a card and played.

"A Royal Marriage."

"You see," said Claudia.

"But I don't care," said Ann. "That's forty." She marked it. "What does it matter?"

"It always matters to win," said Claudia. "Attend, please. It's you again. Will you remember to take a card!"

"I am attending. I can't attend. I don't know what I'm doing, you cruel woman."

They played on for a few minutes.

And Ann had such horribly good luck.

"There. Sequence!" said Claudia. "Two hundred and fifty. Have you marked it? Well, mark it. You would have missed that if I'd allowed you to stop."

"Taskmistress!" said Ann. "You're so hard, Claudia. How can you be so hard?"

"Play, please," said Claudia.

And Ann would manage to play again, and then again Coram's face would come between her and the cards. Only last night. A few short hours ago. Where was he now? What was he doing? What was he doing that moment!

"Oh, Claudia!"

But they were getting through the evening. Claudia's real dread was for the night.

Tea was brought in and made a diversion. Ann rose at once to 'make' it, but Claudia did not move, and Ann, as if acting in obedience to a command from her guest, brought the two cups to the card table.

They played on. Claudia drank her tea and asked for more. Ann left most of hers.

"What are you?" Ann asked.

"Six hundred and twenty? What are you?"

Ann's score was eight hundred and forty. No, she had forgotten to mark ten for the last trick. Eight hundred and fifty.

"Oh," she said, "if I must win, can't we count that I have won?"

Claudia was inexorable. They played the game to an end.

But when Ann was free of it, she did not seem very sure of what she wanted to do. She moved from the table where Claudia sat shuffling (quite unnecessarily) the cards before (also quite unnecessarily) putting them away in their box. Claudia, all calmness outwardly, expected her to go out of the room, but she did not. She went over to the piano. She put her fingers on the keys and sat still for a moment or two without striking a note.

"Play something," Claudia said.

Ann did not move.

"Chopin. One of the preludes."

Ann shook her head.

"Nonsense, Ann, play."

"Oh, very well," said Ann. But she did not. Instead she got up abruptly and went over to one of the windows — the window from behind the curtains of which Claudia had watched Coram ride away. Claudia thought of this now. The thought of it, the thought of what she had seen, renewed her faith that all would be well. She closed the bézique box, pushed it from her, and went over to Ann at the window.

Outside, the gardens were all dark. The rain was still falling — in steady lines now — and here

the gentle swish of it on the leaves was clearly audible. Only as the eye accustomed itself to the darkness could even the nearer features of the landscape be discerned.

"I'm glad it is raining," Ann said.

"A nice soft rain," Claudia said. "Summer rain. It will be fine again to-morrow."

But she knew what Ann meant, knew that the night would have been intolerable if it had repeated the loveliness of the night before. She, too, was glad that it did not. Inwardly, though she was so certain that all would be well, she knew that the worst hour for Ann was still to come. That would be the hour which corresponded to the hour the night before, which had held, in the compass of its sixty minutes, her great unhappiness and her great happiness. The very passing of the evening, that 'getting through' upon the accomplishment of which she had been congratulating herself, began to fill her with apprehension.

Ann's eyes and her own eyes glanced from time to time at the clock.

"Tired, Claudia?"

"No, not a bit."

She was — very tired. The strain was telling upon her. But Ann was asking her to watch with her. She was sure of it. She would do that gladly. Not one hour, she thought. She would sit up all night if need be.

"Then we won't go just yet," Ann said.

"Yes; don't let us go up yet," Claudia said. "I shan't want to go for ages."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Then I'll ring and send word to Branton not to sit up for me."

The bell was rung, the message given.

And the last hour was the strangest of that strange night. For at half-past eleven the cards were taken out again — Claudia had put them away for nothing — and the two ladies sat down once more to bézique.

CHAPTER IV

And so at least the back of the night was broken. It was one o'clock when at length they went up to bed. By then Claudia knew herself to be wan with fatigue, but that was a price to pay cheerfully if the answering signs of fatigue which she saw in Ann promised sleep. The hour which was safely over had not been lived through without wear and tear to the nerves. She had seen Ann's hands tremble, she had seen her eyebrows contract, the eyes beneath them contracting also like the eyes of one racked by physical pain, — the stabbing pain, say, of neuralgia, — and she had seen the teeth set in the resolution to endure. Her own support at such moments had been the hope that the very acuteness of Ann's suffering would prove its cure. Worn out then by the sight of what she felt herself powerless to alleviate, she had watched for the signs of exhaustion in Ann. Worn out, but content, she had seen them. Then she knew that she might go to bed.

She helped Ann to put out the lamps and shut the windows, and only when she was alone for a moment in the hall, whither she had preceded her to light the bedroom candles, did she allow herself at last the luxury of a long and a well-earned yawn.

Ann, who had stayed to shut the piano, joined her and they went up the wide stairs.

And so to the darkness. It was perhaps Claudia's very real exhaustion that caused her last waking thoughts to be chilled with what were her first real misgivings. Suppose she had been mistaken. Suppose she had misread what she had seen. Suppose . . .

Not to be thought! Not to be thought even if she had not been too tired to think at all. She was thankful, however, that she was too tired to think. She fell asleep.

And Ann in the darkness? Ann slept, too.

And somewhere else in the darkness Timothy Coram. He perhaps did not sleep? Or, perhaps, he also slept . . .

And in the circle in the wood all night the soft rain fell on the statue of the waiting boy . . .

THE THIRD BOOK

BOOK THE THIRD

CHAPTER I

PHARAOH'S daughter found her adopted son in the bulrushes. We are told so, anyway, and we have no reason to believe that she did not — as little reason, indeed, to believe that she did not as to believe that she arranged to find him there. Ann found, or was generally supposed to have found, hers through an advertisement.

The advertisement was in the "Times" for all the world to see. True it had not her complete name to it for reasons which we shall learn; but Mr. Pargiter, of Pargiter and Fosberry, drew it up, and Pargiter and Fosberry, of Windlestone, — the Georgian house with the exceedingly beautiful fanlight, nearly opposite to Miss Blondin's, in Rochester Street, — were, as every one knew, the Redmayne solicitors; had been the Redmayne solicitors from what Mrs. Piper, when she had occasion to convey a sense of remote periods, always spoke of as "time in memoriam."

It must have been about a year after the night when Claudia and Ann kept their vigil and played bézique twice in one evening, that it became known that the lady of Redmayne was thinking of adopting a child. Ann had been away the greater part of that

year. Nothing new in that. For months at a time Redmayne was accustomed to being dismantled and shut up, and during Mr. Forrester's life often for longer than that. Ann had been abroad — Kissingen first; then Switzerland; then, as the year advanced and the weather grew cooler, the north of Italy. Then, Claudia, who had been with her part of the time, joining her again after a visit or two amongst her own relations, Sicily. Then Italy again. Then, suddenly, Paris. After that, little out-of-the-way places in France.

It was the tail-end of the season when Ann got back, and as, for the few weeks that she would be in London before she went down to Redmayne, it did not seem worth while to open the house in Curzon Street, or bring up the servants, she went to a hotel. She went, as she always went, when she had need of a hotel in London, to the Bath Hotel. The Bath Hotel stood where the Ritz, or rather where a portion of the Ritz, was destined to stand a few decades later, and was at the corner of Piccadilly and Arlington Street.

In Arlington Street was the Fotheringhams' London house.

As Ann stepped out of the hotel on the day after her arrival, she met Lady Fotheringham, who was followed by a footman and half a dozen dogs of various breeds and sizes.

"Mrs. Forrester!" cried that lady, extending both hands and seizing, indeed, the two hands of Ann —

or as much of each of them as the handle of a parasol which Ann held in one, and the purse which she chanced to be holding in the other, allowed her to grasp. "This is delightful. I'd no idea you were back. We never meet. I declare we never meet. Are you staying in London? Here? Then dine with us to-night. Only Flora Mallard — and come on with us to the opera. Say you will and I'll let you go now, for you're going shopping, I can see, and I'm taking my menagerie for a walk in the Green Park."

Ann said she would; and so it came that two of her neighbours in the country heard her say that the reason she spent so little of her time at Redmayne was that she found the place lonely — so much so, indeed, — she paused and focussed attention, — so much so that she seriously thought sometimes of adopting a child for company.

"One can't," she said, "always have people staying with one. And I have n't," she added, shaking her head at Lady Fotheringham, "your passion for dogs."

"There I agree with you," said Lord Fotheringham, whose wife's menagerie was a standing grievance.

"My beautiful dogs!" cried Lady Fotheringham. "My angels! But a child?"

"A child?" echoed Lady Mallard. "Do you mean a — child?"

"A little boy or a little girl," said Ann. "A little boy for choice."

Lady Mallard, whose growing daughter, though still in the schoolroom, was beginning to date her, said: "My dear, you'd be bored to death. Nurses, nursery-maids! Think! And children have illnesses. Whooping-coughs, measles, chicken-poxes. Anything that's infectious and troublesome. Mabel has had measles twice, though I always used to think that was impossible."

"And yet I don't know," said Ann. "People do adopt children. And I've always thought it must be rather interesting to watch a child develop."

"One's own child, perhaps," said Lady Mallard doubtfully.

"That, of course, would be more interesting," said Mrs. Forrester.

That was all just then. Nobody knew whether or not she was serious, though she seemed serious. The allusion to dogs obscured her purpose. A pet dog or a pet child. Something to keep. How could you tell? Start a rumour, however, and it will grow its own wings. When some one said to Claudia at a party, "I hear Mrs. Forrester talks of adopting a child," Ann knew that this rumour had not only grown wings, but learnt to use them.

"What did you say?" she asked Claudia when Claudia told her.

"Oh, that you talked of so many things," said Claudia, smiling.

"We could go down to Redmayne next week," said Ann. The way, she meant, was paved.

They did not go, however, till a fortnight later, partly because Claudia (in half mourning) was enjoying London so much, and had earned any gratification that Ann could give her, partly to allow the rumour ample time to reach Redmayne itself.

The rumour duly reached Redmayne — a week before Redmayne's mistress. Mrs. Piper heard it from Whipple, who heard it from Fenton, who heard it in the private bar of the Lion and Goldfish at Fotheringham, where he drank a glass of beer, and perhaps two glasses, with Moseley, one of the gamekeepers at the Court. Moseley walked out with Lady Fotheringham's maid.

"Your lady, they tell me, 's looking out for some one to adopt," was what Moseley said. "I says, 'That old tale!'" Fenton said to Whipple in recounting the incident; "for I was n't going to hear Redmayne news from Fotheringham nor nowhere else. Not likely! But when I 'd said that, I let him talk. Some conversation or the other his Miss Simson had heard or heard talk of. Mrs. Forrester asking Lady F. if she knew of one suitable, from what I made out. If she did, his lordship, I thought to meself, would n't have been very hard put to it to find her some one — gentle birth and all, or semi anyway, eh? — nor, if what they say 's true, his lordship's lady neither! Nothing in it, I s'pose?"

"Nothing," said Whipple.

"So I thought," said Fenton, "or else Moseley he was very circumstahntial."

"Nothing in it?" Whipple said to Mrs. Piper.

"Nothing," said Mrs. Piper. "Bringing their gossip here, indeed! As if we should n't have heard."

"I don't know how, though," Whipple said — "who was to tell us, I mean."

For Branton was gone. There was no Branton to write such Simson gossip to Redmayne. Branton had not been taken abroad for what, on the other side of the green baize door, was considered the rather inadequate reason that she spoke no foreign languages.

"How should we have heard unless Mrs. Forrester herself had written to tell us?"

"If it's true," said Mrs. Piper, "she will tell us. She'll tell me at once, as you tell deaths to the bees. But that Simson of Lady Fotheringham's has made it up out of her own head, you'll see. And that Moseley 's just as bad. Simson, indeed! Lady Fotheringham never did get a good class of lady's-maid, nor never will. You can judge a maid by a lady as you can judge a lady by her maid."

"You never liked Miss Simson," was what Whipple said inwardly. Aloud he said that Mrs. Piper was right. If there was any truth in the story Mrs. Forrester would tell her at once.

The house was ready now for her arrival. On a day towards the end of July she arrived. That very evening it was known that the report was at least not without foundation.

"Some of my friends advise a little girl and some a little boy. Which do you think, Mrs. Piper?"

Mrs. Piper said: "Oh, a boy, 'm, for choice and for preference. To be sure, little girls are very nice. But a boy's a boy when all's said and done."

That was true, Ann said. Still, a boy somehow was more of a responsibility. But either was a responsibility for that matter, and the degrees of responsibility did not, perhaps, come into the question. Mrs. Piper's feeling was for a boy, then?

"Oh, yes, 'm, a boy. There's no comparison, to my mind, though female myself."

"Well, it is all in the air," said Mrs. Forrester. "I may think no more of the idea, or I may consider it in earnest."

But that she was thinking more of the idea ("Such nonsense all the same!" Piper permitted herself to call it, in the extreme privacy of the room where the portrait on porcelain stood on the mantelpiece facing the piano) was borne out by the scraps of conversation that were duly retailed behind the green baize door.

"Mrs. Nanson she recommends a little girl," Whipple reported one day — "says they don't have to go to school like little boys do. Says they're more of companions. Seemed to make Mrs. Forrester laugh somehow, that did."

"She has a comical way, Mrs. Nanson," Mrs. Piper said.

"Yes. Maybe. She spoke quite serious. A little

girl with blue eyes, she said, and golden hair. Or, if it must be a boy, a little boy about five years old. Nothing very comic in that, I should have said. But you never can tell, I don't know whether you've noticed, you never can tell what will make them laugh, can you?"

By 'them' he meant not his excellent mistress particularly — dining-rooms generally: the incomprehensible people who sat at a table as against the normal, balanced, sensible persons whose duty it was, dish or decanter in hand, to walk round one. Yes, Mrs. Piper had noticed that. They did often laugh, in her experience also, where no joke was.

Not, she said, that Mrs. Forrester was ever given to much laughter.

Whipple's mistress, indeed, was graver than she used to be, as, if he had been really observant, Whipple might have observed; but she had certainly laughed that day.

Another day Whipple's announcement was that Mrs. Forrester was going to advertise for what she wanted.

Mrs. Piper, not really disapproving on the whole, was a little dismayed at the thought of an advertisement. An advertisement seemed to threaten something from goodness knew where. If Mrs. Forrester really wished to adopt some one, would not the right course to pursue have been to make known her desire to her friends, make enquiries

amongst them, if one or another of them might not, perhaps, know of some suitable and available child? But an advertisement! Mrs. Piper did not even approve of advertisements as a medium through which to procure servants. Indoor servants, anyway. Outdoor servants, of course, were different. You might advertise for a groom or a gardener. But even then . . .

"Dear, dear," she exclaimed, "what is it she really wants?"

Mr. Pargiter, Whipple said, had been written to.

That relieved Mrs. Piper a little.

Mr. Pargiter arrived the next day.

"I suppose you'll think I'm mad," Ann said to him at the end of a quarter of an hour's talk.

"Well, it's an experiment," said Mr. Pargiter, — "an experiment certainly."

That, said Mrs. Forrester, was exactly the light in which she desired the matter to be regarded.

"I don't propose to bind myself till I can see for myself how the experiment is likely to turn out. If I find a child that I like — that I can care for — I propose to provide for him, or for her, as the case may be. But I don't mean to bind myself at the outset. What I want is to find a child. Of course, I could go to a workhouse or an orphanage, but I have a bias in favour of a well-born child. I have often seen the sort of advertisement that I want you to draft for me."

Mr. Pargiter drew a sheet of paper towards him. She had received him in the library.

"The 'Times,' I think," he said — "or the 'Morning Post'?"

"Either. We can see. Perhaps both."

"The 'Times,' shall we say, to start with?"

"Yes, the 'Times.'"

Mr. Pargiter unscrewed his gold pencil; and paused.

"You have considered the — er — the possible embarrassment a child might be to you in the — the event of your wishing to — to —"

Mrs. Forrester helped him.

"To marry again? Yes, I have considered that, and decided that we need not consider it."

"Exactly. Exactly. You will, however, I know, pardon me, if, before we proceed to business, I remind you as an old man, Mrs. Forrester, that you are a young woman, and that — well, ladies have been known to change their minds."

Mrs. Forrester smiled.

"In every undertaking one must risk something," she said. "I think we will risk that in this one. I have n't, I may say, any thought of marrying again, or any belief that I am likely to change my mind. You must look upon this, Mr. Pargiter, as the whim of a woman who for that reason sees the prospect of finding herself one day rather lonely — if, indeed, she does not do so already."

Mr. Pargiter bowed.

"I am here to take your directions," he said.

"Well, then, the usual thing. 'A lady wishes to adopt,' and so on. Oh, you know the sort of thing. Healthy. Total surrender — is n't it called? References. Oh, yes, I suppose a boy. The age? Oh, well, anything up to three. I lean myself towards quite a young child — a baby, in fact. But we can see."

"And the answers?" he said. "The answers, I suppose, to Rochester Street."

"No; I propose to put my name to the advertisement and to have the answers sent here."

Mr. Pargiter demurred to that. He demurred very seriously to that. The letters might run into scores, fifties, hundreds even. Mrs. Forrester did not realize what she might be in for. Each inconvenient boy child in the four kingdoms might be offered to her. Every poor clerk with a growing family, or struggling parson with half a dozen clamorous mouths to feed, must be reckoned with as a possible applicant. The governors of institutions even might write.

"You don't know, Mrs. Forrester. Believe me, you don't know. Why, you might even see a procession of mothers with their infants trailing across the park."

That danger could surely be met by the way the advertisement was worded. 'By letter only,' — some such clause. The other, she supposed, must be risked like the chance of her changing her mind.

"You really mean that?" Mr. Pargiter said.

Ann did, it appeared, really mean it. She continued to argue. It was possible, she said, that she might be overwhelmed with applications. She thought it improbable, but it was possible. They would stick to the 'Times,' therefore, — a three-penny paper, remember, and so less generally read by what was called the million. The advertisement could be as long as Mr. Pargiter liked, and could thus be made to protect her as far as might be.

"No; my own name and my own address. I shall like opening the letters. I shall do nothing rash, I promise you. If the correspondence is more than I can cope with agreeably, I shall hand it over to you."

But Mr. Pargiter demurred and continued to demur so seriously to this part of his client's proposal that in the end she agreed to a compromise. It was settled that Ann's full name should not appear, but that replies should be addressed to *Mrs. F.*, care of Pargiter and Fosberry, of Windlestone.

"We will forward them to you. You shall have the opening of them, Mrs. Forrester."

"I should like that," said Ann, though the arrangement was not quite what she had intended.

So it came, since *Mrs. F.* was a sufficiently transparent cover, that Ann's world, at least, — the world, however, of a tolerably large visiting list, — learnt that Mrs. Forrester of Redmayne did, indeed, wish to adopt a child.

Ann — conceding something for expediency, it was true — had carried the advertisement through. Only Claudia, frightened, herself, sometimes, in spite of the ridiculous things which she would say and which Ann on occasion had to rebuke afterwards with a "For goodness' sake, Claudia, don't overdo it," — only Claudia, I say, knew what the subterfuges to which Ann had seen herself driven cost her.

CHAPTER II

CLAUDIA was amazed sometimes — nay, was amazed all the time. Often enough she was surprised at herself, but then never wholly surprised, for intriguing, though she had never intrigued other than quite harmlessly, came very naturally to her. She was a minx, in other words, but a good-hearted minx and a very kind one. But Ann! No one so unminxlike fundamentally as Ann. And Ann was carrying things through by such preparations and foreseeings and diplomacies as she, Claudia, would not have been competent to conceive — Ann in whose nature intrigue, subterfuge, pretence of any sort, had no part or place! It was amazing and more than amazing. It was somehow admirable.

Nothing in the strange year that was over had been more wonderful, perhaps, than the Ann that had emerged from it. A new Ann, yet an Ann not so much born again as, herself, fruitful; not so much renewed as completed, and, so, equipped. It was her equipment at which Claudia marvelled.

She had thought of the advertisement. She had carried it through. She would carry the whole thing through. Claudia could claim no more than to have thought of elaborations — as, for instance, when she had given voice before Whipple and the footmen to the "A little girl with blue eyes and golden hair,

or, if it must be a boy, a little boy about five years old," which, making Ann laugh in spite of herself, had called forth the admonition, for goodness' sake, however, not to 'overdo it.' Claudia's elaborations were very valuable, but it was Ann always who thought in the first instance of what Claudia perceived would bear to be elaborated. Ann, it was, who had thought of the short visit to Paris, where she had got on to the track of the ultimate little unlikely French town.

In after years, for both of them, the year that was over, may have seemed and did seem sometimes, like a bad dream; yet, for the achievements which it saw, the mastery of difficulty after difficulty, a dream not wholly bad. For Ann, amid its desperations, it held hours of sheer beauty. These compensated for much that was even atrocious. But for these Ann thought that she must have given in. Yet, so strong was the spirit of fight raised in her by the very difficulties which beset her, that it is possible that misery might have accomplished by itself what misery, shot with these gleams of unsustained but sustaining happiness, did accomplish. Ann, who had never in her life had to fight for anything, faced suddenly and unexpectedly with the necessity for fighting, if not for her life itself, for a place, at least, in the life of her own community, had developed qualities which had not failed and would not fail her. There were times when Claudia had not

been needed, when she could stand aside, as it were, and leave the battle, in the preparation for which she had assisted so loyally, to Ann's unaided competence.

"I'll manage this," Ann would say.

Looking back, it seemed to Claudia sometimes that Ann had managed everything.

The fight was, of course, with circumstances — not people; not people yet. The fight was that the fight should not be with people, that it should never be with people. That was the point of it and its supreme difficulty. It was a fight that must not for a moment be seen to be a fight at all. Never must that enemy — people as against circumstances — know, or suspect itself, to be an enemy. The unconscious hostility of circumstances was formidable enough. The conscious hostility of people would be . . . ah, that was a thought unthinkable! From such a thought — from the thinking-out of such a thought — even the resolute Ann recoiled. The world was younger then, more stupid, perhaps; the penalties incomparably greater.

And Ann was so wise. Claudia had been inclined to advise America — a continent as against 'the Continent,' a hemisphere as against a country. There was much to be said for Claudia's suggestion, for in those days people did not go backwards and forwards between Great Britain and the United States. Americans — more enterprising than the stay-at-home English, came to England. England went to America, of course, but had not got into the habit

of going to America. Claudia was disposed to be urgent. France, the first thought, had then, together with Italy, Switzerland, and Germany, been discussed and discarded. Paris. You ran up against people at every turn; London itself would be easier to hide in. London, indeed, was discussed. London, after all, was comprised in an area bounded by a line drawn at a three-mile radius from Charing Cross. Outside that — within that also on one side, at least, of the river — were whole districts unexplored, great tracts of crowded streets wherein the foot of any one to whom you were known, or known by sight or by name, was probably never set. But London was too near home and was barred out. Rome? Not to be taken into consideration at all. Every one you knew went there at some time or other. Capitals — since at any moment at any one that you could think of somebody was liable to turn up — capitals generally were ruled out. Then why not America? There seemed nowhere else left. But Ann was sure that it must not be America. Could not say why exactly, only was sure; and said there must be places less far afield — places where you could lie low, where you would be nobody's business but your own. There must be such places, even though every place which suggested itself had for one reason or another been rejected. Time, meanwhile, did not stand still. Place after place, place after place, was mooted, determined on even, but always eventually rejected. It was then that Ann

suddenly moved. Something from the beginning had been left undone. That was one of the moments when of her amazing confidence she said, "I'll manage this." She meant, in this instance, that one other person must be admitted into the secret, and would arrange it for her.

Her first thought, France, had been right. Paris itself had been right, but not to stay in, not to hide in. Paris for that one other person — he should have been thought of long since! — who must be told as much or as little as need be; but just must be told. The consulting-room, when all was said, was sacred as the confessional: one person, of course, must be told. In that discovery she had found wisdom. Claudia admitted freely that she was convinced.

And having found wisdom she had found not wisdom only. She found an understanding and a humane as well as a merely trustworthy man. She had found — chanced upon, maybe — a fellow creature. She had had an idea that these things did happen, were known to happen, and that there must be recognized ways of dealing with them. Her instinct had led her aright. The doctor asked no questions — none, that is, but such as might help him to advise her. It was assumed that there were reasons for what was said and what was not said. Ann had no duplicities to practise here; *ça s'arrangera* the keynote of the interview. All, indeed, in a sense might be said to have arranged itself then and there. Ann came away with the name of the little city of refuge

whither in the fulness of time she might repair, and not the name of the place only, but with a letter from the doctor to commend a patient — Mrs. . . . ? — Mrs. Vincent — to a colleague there, who might be relied upon to make all arrangements for her reception and her comfort during her stay.

Ann had but grasped her nettle with the usual resulting advantages. But the courage to grasp it had been there, and Claudia might indeed wonder and admire.

Backwards and forwards over the year the minds of both Claudia and Ann must have ranged afterwards for many a long day. It may be said at once for Claudia that though she had had a shock she had not been 'shocked.' The knowledge that her own grievous misapprehension had precipitated the catastrophe may have helped her to understand it. She did understand it, and she knew thus that Ann, in spite of everything, was somehow not only unsullied, but in essentials was unchanged, by what had befallen her. As her mind ranged over the year it was always in the light of 'befalling,' of 'happening to,' of 'overtaking,' that she regarded the catastrophe in relation to Ann. Ann herself did not regard it so indulgently. She had been weak past all denying. There were days when she was humbled to the dust. But from such days she uprose strengthened, steadfast, and always and always with the knowledge that if she had lost something irretriev-

ably, she had gained something else, something perhaps greater than that which she had lost. She had such an understanding now of life with its contradictions and its myriad complexities, such a new breadth of sympathy and of pity, as she could have attained to, it may be, in no other way. Impossible that she should view her lapse in its results as wholly evil. Its penalties were none the lighter for a conviction that showed itself by degrees to be an acknowledgment or an acceptance, but they were certainly thereby made the easier to face and to take up and to bear.

Goodness! When Ann looked back . . . Goodness! When even Claudia!

Timothy's letter, which was to have put everything right, had arrived, as Claudia had predicted, the morning after the vigil. Not Claudia herself, if she had seen it then, could have pretended to misunderstand it. Ann did not misunderstand it. It was not so much the knell of her hopes as the ratification of their absence. She had had no hope. From the moment when she had heard that it was Bulkley and not Coram who was waiting for her in the library, she had had no hope. Earlier even than that. Was there not a point in the unfinished game of croquet that marked the exact moment, perhaps, when hope had failed her? The lover rides away. He loves. Oh, yes, he loves — does truly love, as he knows love. The tears that she had seen in his eyes — that to her dying day she would remember

that she had seen in his eyes — spoke to that. They were in his letter, too, these tears, blinding her own eyes with tears as she read. He loves, but he rides away. The chalice — the pity and the shame of it were here — the chalice not a chalice, but a stirrup cup! And, at that even, a stirrup cup, not so much in the way that it had been accepted (for it had been accepted humbly) as in the way that it was conceived to have been offered. The smart and the sting were there.

Claudia did not see the letter when it came — would never, perhaps, have seen it but for what, unthought of and unthinkable even as it was then, was yet to come. She saw it some weeks later. At the time she saw only its effect on Ann.

And its effect on Ann was puzzling. Ann was like one who has received some secret wound. She said to Claudia: "It's finished, Claudia. We won't talk of it. I have had the letter you promised me. But I was n't wrong: he is sailing to-day." Little other things she said. "I'm not blaming him, understand this. I'm just seeing that the whole thing was a mistake — that I was mistaken, I mean." "He does n't know that I was mistaken. He does n't know that there was any mistake." To these she added: "So, least of all, did he know that his letter would show me that there had been a mistake. If his letter had been written to tell me that, I don't know what I should have done. But it was n't."

"But you'll answer it, Ann."

"Yes, I shall answer it, but to make it plain to him that there must n't be any more."

"Ann, are you sure that — that it is finished?"

"I know that it is."

"But you 'll keep him as a friend."

Ann shook her head.

"No; I can't keep him as a friend."

There was something behind all this. It was evident that to Ann the letter was final. Yet, though it was plain that it had dealt her a blow the mark of which, hidden though it might be, she would, perhaps, carry through life, it seemed equally plain that the blow had been dealt unconsciously. And something else was plain to Claudia as the days passed. The letter which had hurt Ann so grievously had not in itself been such as to disillusion her utterly. It seemed, on the contrary, to have given Ann, with the pain which it had inflicted, some sort of balm or some sort of solace. Ann carried it for a time, Claudia was sure, over her heart.

Presently in the sequence of events Ann seemed better, became, as we say, more like herself. With a widening sea, and then a widening space generally, between her and the writer of the letter, she gained ease. A page was turned or a door closed. She volunteered nothing, and Claudia on her part asked nothing. So the early days went by; became weeks.

Presently Claudia, who by then had paid a long visit to Ann and had judged her sufficiently re-

covered now to be left alone, broached the subject of her departure. She had relations to whom visits must be paid. She was able, as we have learnt, to pay these later. Not then, nor for a considerable time! To her surprise, Ann, whom she had thought better, showed herself not to be better at all. She met Claudia's proposal with a reluctance to listen to it that had an appearance almost of dismay. Claudia, seeing that something was amiss, and conscious in a sort of retrospective way that she might even have observed that something was amiss, withdrew her proposal at once with a warm, "Of course, I won't go yet, dear, if you want me. I'll stay with you as long as ever you like. I only thought, as I'd been here so long . . ."

"I had n't dreamt of your going. It's horribly dull for you, I know, but I hoped you'd stay . . ."

Ann was in an extraordinary mood. There was reproach in her words and her tone.

"Ann, I *love* being here. I love being with you. You know I do."

"But you spoke of going?"

"I'm not going. I said I would stay as long as you wanted me."

"I do want you."

And then, without in the least understanding why, she had a momentary but acute sense of fear. And not her own fear exactly. Fear of a fear that she guessed at dimly? Or fear, perhaps, that she did guess at some fear? Fear very near to her. Fear in

Ann? Deadly fear in Ann? The moment was horrible. It passed. We know such moments in nightmare.

When it had passed — it had the quality of a moment in nightmare in which a lifetime is compressed into the space between one tick of the clock and the next — she did not think of it, could not, indeed, clearly recall it, but did not forget it.

"Was I cross?" Ann was saying; and Ann was smiling.

"Cross?"

"Impatient, then? I did n't mean to be. I do want you, Claudia. Forgive me. I know you'll forgive me. I behave abominably sometimes, I think, — like a spoilt child. No one else would put up with me. I've been through something. It is that. It's all that I don't want to talk about. You made allowances for me once before."

"Ann, dear, as if I had to! As if there were any occasion!"

"But there is," Ann said. "Oh, there is."

Claudia kissed her.

"I love being here," she said again.

"You don't know what it has been to me," Ann said.

Another week passed. The 'moment' did not return — did not repeat itself rather. But somehow there was a menace. Ann was silent, brooding.

And then it became quite, quite plain that something was amiss. And then came the dreadful day when Ann told her.

CHAPTER III

KISSINGEN, whither they went first and went soon, was, as will have been guessed, an excuse for the unavoidable parting with Branton. There was otherwise no need for any immediate action. It did not matter where Ann went, would not matter in all probability for half a year, or perhaps longer. One place would do as well as another, but until the days for which thought would have to be taken, a place in the world, as against a place out of it, seemed, perhaps, advisable — the main stream as opposed to a backwater. Kissingen, then, before the wanderings. Here the two ladies met several friends and acquaintances, and Ann one of her few relations, her cousin, Lady Trent, who did not think her looking well and said so. But Lady Trent was the sort of person who always said that sort of thing, and Ann had no real fear that it would generally be said that she was looking ill. Fear, indeed, for the time being was in abeyance. Something seemed to have happened in the passing of uncertainty into certainty, or perhaps even in the unburdening of her heart to Claudia.

Claudia came to understand more and more. What she did not yet understand was the part the statue had played in what had happened. Perhaps Ann, even, though the statue was prominent in her

story, did not quite understand it either. What Ann knew, however, but could not convey to Claudia, was that but for the waiting boy in the wood . . . Well, what? What, after all? She would not have fallen in love with Timothy Coram? She could not say that, for she could not think it, knowing now that she had always been in love with him. Would not have found out that she was (and had always been) in love with him? Not quite that either. She would have found that out when she heard that he wanted to go. What, then? She thought that she meant that, but for the statue, her love for him would have been on a different plane. His form would have meant less to her — the unnerving beauty of his lines. The influence of the statue, of the three smiling satyrs, of what she thought of still as the magic circle, was evil, then? She could not admit that; did not even think it. What she knew was that the story of her love would have been different, and that she would not (mystery *was* here) have been in her present desperate case.

Claudia had not seen the statue. Ann, for some reason which Claudia could not fathom, and which Ann shrank from trying to fathom herself, did not, at that time, anyway, wish Claudia to see it. So things stood.

Yet Claudia understood how what had happened had happened. She felt sometimes as if she had known all along what had happened, had known under her complete ignorance, known when she woke

to find a radiant Ann by her bedside in the dawn, and to enfold her in her arms and be enfolded by Ann in hers . . . Earlier still? Known what would happen when she had sent the trembling Ann to meet her lover in the starlit garden? Sometimes even that. Actually, of course, she had not known, had not, as we say, had the remotest idea, the ghost of an inkling. And yet in the fulness of her comprehension it seemed to her sometimes as if she must have known, and once, in the reflected glow of one of those supremely happy hours, which, it has been said, did come to Ann amid the welter of the horrors which beset her, she thought that if she had verily known she was not sure that she would have acted differently.

She understood Ann then, but I fear me that — of her minxishness, this! — she did not entirely fail to understand Coram also. Her eyes were wider open than Ann's. She knew something of men, and knew that, in certain matters, the world asked less of them, and that what the world asked the world generally got. Men as lovers were divided roughly into lovers and light lovers. Difficult often to tell one from the other. Each class comprised numberless grades. Roughly, however, the division held. Coram was neither and was both. He served not God and Mammon which we are told is impossible, but God in a sense at least — and somehow a very true sense! — and the god of love. She was convinced of the good in him; she divined also the warp-

ing, spoiling streak. She guessed, though Ann had not guessed, and perhaps did not even now, at those other persons in his life — those persons whom we have come to think of comprehensively as the Mallards and the Fotheringhams and the Mallingers. She had nothing to go upon except what she knew, or thought she knew, of men, and the light cast on him by his own action. It may be that a word or two of Miss Blondin's took colour from both and gave colour in turn to her conjecture. "There will be sore hearts," Miss Blondin had said. And, "Such a favourite, so to speak, with the ladies." And, "But there, perhaps I must not say too much!" Miss Blondin, under her air of having stepped (with only slight modifications in the process) out of the pages of "Cranford," had, Claudia was sure of it, the devil's own knowledge of the world . . .

But though Timothy Coram had failed Ann and in a sense even betrayed her, and though he had so lamentably caused Claudia to make her fatal mistake, Claudia did not altogether lose faith in him. His letter shattered Ann's hopes, hurt her grievously by its unconsciousness, but, as Claudia had suspected, gave her a sort of negative happiness even in the dealing of its blow. Claudia, when Ann showed it to her, — it was necessary to the telling of her tale, — saw in a moment why. It was a letter which postulated light love, yet which no real light lover could have written. It was the letter of an extraordinarily 'nice' man, whatever this nice man

had done. But for its takings-for-granted, it was such a letter as would have made any woman happy. If it was anything it was a plea for forgiveness. The writer was at his lady's feet and on his knees at her feet. She saw, as Ann saw, that, since he was none the less going, the letter was, as Ann supposed it, 'final'; but she saw, as Ann, she gathered, did not see, that he thought he was meant to go. This she did not point out, for it implied, at least as Ann would view it, a yet deadlier blow to Ann's pride, and Ann's pride was already reeling. It was doubtful, at that moment of abasement, whether Ann's pride would ever recover itself, and the whole future, Claudia saw clearly, depended upon Ann's pride. Her courage would have its root in her pride, and she would need all her courage. Impossible, therefore, to do anything that might have the effect of wounding her more deeply where she was most vulnerable. Claudia forbore then to draw her attention to what was yet so manifest to herself. But though Claudia did not dare to 'speak,' she dared further. The result of her daring was nil; its effect, to burden her with a secret from Ann. For what Claudia had done in the desperation of those first weeks of knowledge was, upon her own initiative and unknown to and unsuspected by Ann, to write to Timothy Coram.

The recollection of watching the posts loomed very large in Claudia's memories of the early months of the year — loomed larger, perhaps, than the rec-

ollection of things actually more memorable. She would whiten or her heart would thump at the sight of letters lying on a table. Or her heart would thump or seem to stop beating if any one handed her her letters, or if she saw Ann with unopened letters in her hand . . . She learnt the hours of the posts and tried to forestall them — to be there — to be 'down' or to be 'in' — when they were expected. She wondered that Ann did not see her anxiety, but Ann with supreme anxieties of her own did not observe. What caused her still more grievous apprehension was the thought that a cable might come for her, and that she might be out, and that Ann might open it, or, if she were not out, that Ann might be present when it was delivered to her. In fairly propitious circumstances a plausible explanation to fit the second of these eventualities might be counted upon not to fail her; but in the case of the first of them confession would be unavoidable, and then — Heaven itself help her!

But as time went on and no answer came, her apprehensions on these scores died down. She had written her letter to the address given in Coram's letter to Ann, then many weeks old, and she could only suppose that, moving on long since on his travels, he had not received it. No letter came, no telegram, no sign. She continued to watch the posts to the very last — to the time, that is, when Ann at length had to seek the little city of refuge where arrangements had been made for her welfare by the

Paris doctor. By then, however, and even for some time before that, the risk of Ann's seeing a letter if it should come had vanished, for, in view of the approach of the day when the concealment of identities would become necessary, all letters, by arrangement with Ann's bankers in Paris, were forwarded under cover to Claudia herself, who took little journeys to neighbouring but changing *postes restantes* to receive them. With her anxiety, died her hope. Too late then, any letter that might come; too late Timothy Coram himself, if her letter should have brought him. Too late, everything.

For a time she worried herself about the fate of the letter itself. The Dead Letter Office had not brought it back to her. It was presumably still in existence. She pictured it lying in the letter rack of some Western hotel, where, following in Coram's wake, it had come to anchor. It was black with redirections. Some one had not been at the trouble of redirecting it, or, lacking an address to which to forward it, was waiting instructions, or merely would not be bothered. Such a one she hoped might even have destroyed it. She had no anxieties connected in any way with the chances, the probabilities of its being read. The few lines it contained would have no inner meaning for eyes other than those for which they had been intended. As time went on, she inclined more and more to the idea that probably it had, indeed, long since been destroyed, and, occupied by so many other distractions, she was

able presently to banish the whole thing from her mind.

And, with the passing of time, and the quiet, resolute, successful surmountings by Ann of difficulty after difficulty, Coram had become unnecessary. By the time the advertisement appeared in the 'Times' and every one knew that Ann was looking out for a child to adopt, he had become negligible. Coram just did not matter. Ann, if she had looked for vengeance, which she did not, must have perceived that in this she was amply avenged. The woman in the eternal conflict had vanquished the man. She had shown that she could do without him.

And so to what might have been the greatest difficulty of all. But Ann, handling her preparations for this resolutely also, had robbed it of its power. The advertisement and the judicious dropping (in unpromising quarters) of a "*You* don't know by chance of a nice healthy child?" or an "I wish if you hear of anything you would let me know," proved all that was necessary in the way of preparation. Ridiculously easy in the end the accomplishment of what might have been so difficult. About a dozen and a half answers came, in all, to her advertisement. Ann, opening these as they arrived, handed over the greater number of them at once to Pargiter and Fosberry to reply to with polite declinings. Three or four she kept for a day or two to consider, but ultimately forwarded to Windlestone

to be dealt with in the same way. With the writers of two — one from London and one from near London — she caused appointments to be made. There remained one other. Then, with Claudia, she went up once more to the Bath Hotel, whence presently she wrote letters. One of these was to Mr. Pargiter. The Clapham child would not do at all. She made no further comment on the Clapham child. The Finsbury Park little boy was entirely desirable, but had parents, who, though stress of circumstances had induced them to answer a tempting advertisement, were obviously reluctant to part with him. She would not have had the heart to persuade them to give him up, and, when she did not attempt to do so, their relief had been touching. (We may guess, with or without Mr. Pargiter, that she found a way of helping them to keep this little family circle unbroken.) So far, then, her journey to London had been fruitless. She would wait to see one other child about whom she had written.

And it was this child, the child about whom she had written herself, that she and Claudia brought back with them, together with an elderly nurse (Claudia's find) and a young nursery-maid (the elderly nurse's), a fortnight later to Redmayne. There had been, Mr. Pargiter learned, no arrangement to make. Ann had seen the child and had fallen in love with it. A foster mother, who had disclosed enough of its history to her to satisfy her that it was at least probably of the gentle birth for which

the advertisement had stipulated, had handed it over to her, and that was all about it.

It was then that Mr. Pargiter, who had been frowning for some days and had frowned still more over the letter that gave him the details of what he saw he was to regard now in the light of a *fait accompli*, smiled and (there being none to see) smiled again and again smiled. Mrs. Forrester knew more, he fancied, than *she* chose to disclose. He realized her suddenly for a very clever woman. Some one was being sheltered. He smelt a rat, in other words. But he, like the monumental author of the most famous, probably, of all the mixed metaphors that have ever been perpetrated, had, as perhaps he knew then already, seen it "hovering in the air." It was happily not his business to "nip it in the bud." It was happily nobody's business. Why had his client wished her name to appear in the advertisement? Why an advertisement at all? Some one was being very ingeniously sheltered. It was quite, quite plain to him. She was not only a very clever woman, but a very, very kind one.

It would have amused Claudia far more, it is to be feared, than it would have horrified her, if she could have known whom it was that Mr. Pargiter, jumping to his conclusion, as she had once jumped to a conclusion of her own, supposed to be in the position of being sheltered!

So much for downcast eyes, and the willow worn with an air.

CHAPTER IV

BUT if Mr. Pargiter smiled, he smiled only to himself. He would not have smiled to the wife of his bosom in the sanctuary of his own home. He would not have smiled even to Mr. Fosberry, — though if Mr. Fosberry senior, his old partner and his own contemporary, had been living, it is just possible that, under the seal of — well, the professional — shall we say? — he might have permitted himself the flicker of a smile for that gentleman's shrewd and understanding eye. He would have seared his lips with fire rather than have let them show the ghost of such a smile to Ann or to the suspected Claudia herself. He just smiled to himself, and no one else smiled at all. No, not another soul smiled.

Always, of course, in the sense of which we are speaking, for, in every other, the newcomer was received with nothing but smiles — rapturous smiles which, engaging little rogue that he was, he won for himself.

Ann said more than once, "I might have wished to find some one a little older — two would have been the ideal age — but when I saw him . . ."

His name? Every one, of course, asked what his name was, but Ann was prepared for that.

"I shall probably give him my own name later on," she said. "He is called Johnny Smith. I don't

suppose for a moment that that is his name. I had to take him without too many questions or not take him at all. I took him."

And since it was nobody's business to question, or even to ask questions, Ann was spared what might have proved embarrassing, if not, indeed, harassing, and had no more to cope with than natural curiosity.

Extraordinary how easily everything went! Claudia looked on with a sort of sustained wonder. Nothing was going to happen. What, after all, could have been expected to happen? Yet that nothing should happen! Presently it became plain that in all probability nothing ever would happen. Johnny Smith, in other words, was accepted.

And so life settled back into its old grooves, or, more accurately speaking, slid smoothly on to its new lines. There was no commotion. In a house of the size of Redmayne the apportioning-off of a suite of rooms to Master Johnny and his staff was not a matter that occasioned re-distributions, or even any disturbance of the existing order. Mrs. Piper entered with enthusiasm into the carrying-out of what arrangements were necessary, and with her coöperation the arrangements made themselves. Friction was not a condition of things that had to be reckoned with in those days. Orders were given and orders were obeyed. But then as now there were at least currents and undercurrents, which would make their presence felt through any green baize door. And

Ann would have known, we may be sure, if that which showed an unruffled surface had inwardly been troubled.

All was unbroken calm. Johnny was not accepted only, but welcomed. "A little child shall lead them." It was as if a little child could be counted upon to lead you. It was as if a little child had always been what Redmayne, complete in every other particular, had lacked. It was as if Johnny, in his cradle, or his perambulator, or the arms of his adoring attendants, had been the little child that Redmayne had always lacked.

Ann allowed herself now to be, if not happy, at least not unhappy. In Johnny himself she was entirely happy. The hours that she looked forward to were the hours which she spent in the nursery; the hours for which she planned and plotted were the rare hours in which, by half-hours, perhaps, she could have him to herself. Poulton, who had been Claudia's own nurse, and who had been induced to come out of her retirement in Ann's and the little Johnny's interests, would be told to bring her charge down and to leave him, and fetch him again at such and such a time by the clock. Then Ann could let herself go, and perhaps she did. But she never forgot that it was upon the exact degree of her self-control that her happiness depended. She had no real fear that she would betray herself. She had gone through too severe a discipline for that. It was her intention to be content with as much as she had.

And she had so much. In those half-hours she knew that she had everything that really mattered.

Yes, Johnny Smith was accepted. By the facetious he was called 'Tommy Jones,' of course, or 'The Foundling,' or 'Mrs. Forrester's Foundling'; and Redmayne itself was called 'The Foundling Hospital.' These pleasantries were to be expected. They had no significance. They flickered out like ineffectual fires. There was a nine days' wonder and the wonder died down. Ann would send for Johnny to show him to visitors or would not send for him. People asked for him as they asked for any other child in any other house.

Lady Mallard said: "Well, perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps, in spite of the anxiety they are, there is something about children that makes them worth while. They do certainly wind themselves round one's heart. I think, perhaps, you were wise."

"I'm quite sure I was wise," Ann said. "I would n't be without him now for anything. I don't think I knew before what I missed — what every childless woman misses."

"You would have liked him for your own?"

"I mean to make him my own."

Lady Mallard kissed her.

Lady Fotheringham said, "No; I quite see now that a dog would n't have done as well."

Ann addressed her protest to Johnny.

"They insist," she said, smiling — "they insist

on regarding you just as a pet. But you're going to be much more than that to me, are n't you, my darling?"

"He's a very lucky little boy," Lady Fotheringham said.

Everybody said that sooner or later. Every one thought it. Ann could not quite think it, but she was content to hear it said. It made for security — was a sort of earnest of her security, and even his. She meant to make up to him for everything — to make up to him, as far as lay in her power, for the wrong that had been done him.

Her first thought was to provide for him. She could do that generously without injury to any one. Redmayne itself with its rent-roll would go at her death to a cousin of her husband, but all else was her own to do as she liked with. Mr. Pargiter was sent for and she made the will which hitherto, despite all that he could say, she had put off making. With no one near to her or with any claim upon her, she had really been indifferent as to what became of her possessions. But she knew her own mind now and gave her instructions very clearly. Under this will Claudia also benefited — which may, perhaps, have occasioned Mr. Pargiter some wonder; under it, Claudia, in the event of the testator's death during Johnny's minority, was appointed Johnny's sole guardian — which occasioned the good Mr. Pargiter none. Not many days before all was in order — signed, sealed, witnessed.

Then Mr. Pargiter said, "You'll let me say that he is a very lucky little boy."

"I think myself rather a fortunate woman," said Ann.

Mr. Pargiter thought to himself that he knew another very fortunate woman. But it was none of his business. Everything in the end worked round to that.

Claudia now left Ann for some visits to her relations. She had made no plans yet for her own future, and Ann urged her to make her home permanently with her. Claudia still clung to the idea, which she had brought home with her from India, of a little house of her own somewhere with a *rose du Barry* drawing-room and a yellow dining-room; always a yellow dining-room. But there was no immediate hurry about that. She was coming back, and again she promised to stay with Ann as long as Ann should have need of her.

"That will be always," Ann said.

She saw her off at Whitcombe and thought of the day when she had gone there to meet her. A lifetime seemed to have passed since then. She remembered Claudia's ridiculous but also delicious little affectations, and because they meant so little and so much loved her for them. The recollection of them showed her what Claudia had actually done for her. She had stood by her when there would have been every excuse for standing aside. She had stood by her

when a standing-aside, howsoever excusable, howsoever justified even, would have plunged her into despair. She had helped her as no other of her friends, perhaps, would have helped her or could have helped her. Not a reproach nor a protest had come from her, not a hint that too much was asked of her — that anything was being asked of her. Claudia may have wondered at what she thought of as Ann's wonderfulness; assuredly Ann wondered at the wonderfulness of Claudia.

The November day was very different from that day of summer when Claudia had gone through her little pantomime and the carriage had cleaved a way for itself through the midst of a flock of sheep. Mists were hanging over the fields. The distant hills were blotted out. The woods, green then, but now, if they could have been seen, a patchwork of beautiful colours, were shrouded. Dampness everywhere; the roads and the banks running water, the hedges and the trees adrip. A day for indoors and the fireside.

Ann thought of the statue. She had not been near it since the day when she had seen Timothy Coram in the circle with the magpie in his arms. But she could not bear to think of it — could not bear to think of the stone which she always thought of as warm — though for so short a time could it be really warm — chilled, as it must be to-day, wet, desolate. She shivered and turned her thoughts to Johnny. But they went back and back to the

boy waiting in the dreary loneliness of the soaked wood . . .

Presently she found that her heart was aching. It was as if it had been aching for a long time — aching, perhaps, all along — and she had just become aware of it. Was it that with Johnny secured to her, and her purpose thus achieved, she had, as it were, time to think of herself? While Johnny, unborn or born, had been to fight for, nothing else had had any existence for her. But no, no, no! She would not think of Timothy Coram. She would not. She heard his name, of course, from time to time. People spoke of him — asked for him, asked news of him, or asked if she had news of him. She had a formula for such occasions. She had not heard lately, was what she said; or she had not heard for ages; or her last news of him was from Mr. Bulkley. He was in this part of the world or that. He did not speak yet of coming home to England. It was, perhaps, the dread of hearing of him that had caused her, since her return to Redmayne, to put off and to put off the resumption of any active part in the control of the affairs of the property. She could answer questions without thinking of him. But she could not hear news of him without thinking of him. It was as if, under whatever else had been occupying her mind in the year and a half that had passed since she had seen him, she had never ceased to think of him. Had she, as she had believed, succeeded in rooting him out of her life? Or had she

only succeeded in rooting herself out of his? She had silenced him effectually with the one letter she had written to him in answer to his own: a letter in which she had made it clear — so unmistakably clear that one, indeed, who ran might have read! — that that which in a sense had never been begun was ended. She had left him to find explanations which she could not — but also could only too well! — have supplied, and she could guess easily enough at the explanations which would naturally occur to him. But now she knew suddenly that deep down in her heart, where the dull aching had never really ceased, she had known all along that for his part also there was an explanation if only she could have guessed it.

And as this knowledge came to her, this knowledge of a knowledge that she had had, so to say, unawares, she began to visualize him — to make images of him as on that day when she had filled the library with images of him. Not one of the images that came before her now but spoke for the existence of something which would have made comprehensible what as yet was beyond her understanding. She could have forgiven the blow to her pride if she could have understood how the blow came to have been dealt: no, if she could have understood how the blow came to have been unintentional, came not to have been perceived even to be a blow. To understand was to forgive. But to forgive postulated to understand. To forgive without understanding, was that what was being asked of her? Not quite that. To believe

(as she did believe) that there was something which would make all understandable and so to forgive by faith.

Who asked this of her? The images crowded upon her. Timothy in the library unable to tell her that he wanted to go. Timothy trying to tell her. She had had to help him. Timothy, though he wanted to go, half hoping that she would refuse to let him go, to hear of his going. His reluctance so unquestionable. Small wonder if she had been misled! And, persistently, Timothy with the bird in his arms — with the bird in his arms by the statue in the circle . . .

Claudia! She found herself wishing vehemently that she had Claudia back with her. She had an idea now that Claudia partly, at least, understood — had understood from the beginning. Claudia had made the great mistake of all — the mistake which had precipitated the catastrophe — and for that reason had felt that any further meddling was barred to her. She had said nothing. But Ann felt that even yet she cherished some sort of belief in Coram, that though she held no brief for him she conceived some sort of a defence for him, or believed some sort of a defence for him to be possible. Ah, if she herself could but think that! If she could but think that there were anything to be said for him — anything to show that her trust in him had not been entirely misplaced.

But she did think it.

She had just found out that she knew it, that she had always known it.

The carriage turned in at the lodge gates. Presently she was at home. She wore the look which Charles, describing it once to Mrs. Piper and Whipple, had spoken of as expressing an "Oh, is the drive over?" or a "Do I live here?" air of preoccupation or blankness. This time, however, Charles did not observe her looks or her manner. He was busy with the heavy fur rugs of winter as against the mere dust rugs of summer, or was not in an observant mood.

Ann went up mechanically to her room and submitted to the ministrations of Zélie, the last of Branton's successors. She went then to the library where Johnny was brought to her.

This was one of the days when she dared not let herself go. It was part of the burden she had to bear that she could not wholly let herself go. She must not cry. Only in the night, when there was none to see tears or the traces of tears, might she cry. But she might strain her son to her bosom and whisper to him what she would. She unpacked her heart now in less than a dozen words. They held all there was to say.

"I'm so unhappy, Johnny! I'm so desperately unhappy!"

It was what she had said to Claudia in the early

days. It was what she had said before the horror of fear and of dismay had fallen upon her. That horror had passed. She had fought that horror down, had had the strength or perhaps been given, been granted even, the strength to battle with her difficulties and to overcome them. She had thought herself happy, or at least not unhappy. She was back with the unhappiness of the earliest days of all.

What did it mean?

But she had no need to tell herself what it meant. She knew only too well what it meant. Nothing was altered. For all her suffering, perhaps even because of it, she loved Coram still.

CHAPTER V

AND so another stage was reached.

Ann was conscious of a change in herself or her attitude. As she had avoided hearing of Coram, avoided Bulkley even for fear of hearing of him, so now she began to long for news of him. She asked Bulkley to luncheon and led the talk to Coram. Coram was in Ceylon. His friend, whose name Ann would not remember and never forgot, had left him to come home.

"And Mr. Coram?" Ann said. "Does he speak of coming home?"

"Not of coming home, but of wishing to come home."

"Wishing to come home?" Ann said.

"I think he's had enough of travelling," said Bulkley.

"Does he say so?"

"He has n't exactly said so. I think he has, all the same. I have thought so from the tone of his last two or three letters. I've sometimes wondered . . ." He broke off.

"Wondered what?" asked Ann.

"Whether he does n't regret having gone at all."

There was a pause.

"He was so anxious to travel," Ann said when the silence had lasted some seconds.

"While he could n't go," Bulkley said quickly. "I think he shrank from the thought of going from the moment when he found that he could go. I think to the last he half hoped something would happen to prevent, or anyway delay, his going. In the end I think he would have given his right hand not to go."

Ann heard herself say, "Really?" It was as if some one else spoke. Yet was this also one of the things she had always known? Her heart was beating fast.

"He knew he would be homesick," she said. "He told me so."

"He is homesick. That's what's the matter with him. That's what has been the matter with him all the time."

Again Ann's heart leapt. He was not happy. Useless to pretend to herself that she was not relieved, glad even. In that moment she learnt another of love's secrets. She could bear her own unhappiness if she knew that he was not happy either. On that, shrinking a little from what it seemed to imply, she paused, turning the conversation to other matters.

But under whatever they talked of, Ann was conscious of a feeling of exultation. "He is n't happy either," she said to herself. "He is n't happy either." Was it that she wished him unhappy? She did not. She wished him such wishes as a wife might wish for her husband, or a mother for her child, or a lover for a lover. But she was unhappy

for him. If she could know that he was unhappy for her . . . and she had learnt that he was not happy . . .

Bulkley might have observed that at some point her spirits rose. They did rise. A weight seemed to have been lifted off her heart.

Bulkley asked for Johnny.

"The jolliest little chap," he said. "I often meet him in his perambulator about the place."

"Poulton says he knows you quite well. She speaks of you as the gentleman he always has a smile for."

"Yes, we're great friends," said Bulkley.

Ann asked him if he liked children.

He shook his head, smiling.

"But I love Johnny," he said.

And then he said something that caused Ann an emotion which, taking her unexpectedly, she found difficult to repress or even to control.

"It was Coram who had the wonderful way with children," he said. "I've never seen any one like him. He could even hold a baby — he would, too. And they came to him; held out their arms to him. I used to chaff him about it — tell him that was how he managed the tenants. But it was n't. It was just natural to him. He loved children and they loved him. He ought to marry. I've always told him so. There's a father lost in him — wasted."

Long after Mr. Bulkley had gone, the new image that he had called up before Ann haunted her.

The substance of what he had told her was not new to her. She had heard often enough from the wives of the tenants, or of the labourers on the estate, of Coram's popularity with their children. But the image which his words had invoked was wholly new. Chance phrases he had used cut her like a knife, but gave her a sort of poignant happiness. "He could even hold a baby — he would, too." Something about the 'could' and the 'would.' "And they came to him — held out their arms to him." Their smallness, his bigness; their weakness, his strength. For the image of Coram with the bird held to him she had the new image of Coram with a child in his arms. But not just a child. The child she saw in his arms, the child that she could see so plainly, was his son and hers . . .

"I can't bear it," she said to herself, but she did not know whether her eyes were brimming for pain or for ecstasy. "I can't bear any more."

CHAPTER VI

THEN nature protested.

Perhaps Ann herself did not realize what she had been through. Perhaps Johnny's need of her and her own need of Johnny had kept her going. From the end of November to the beginning of February she was ill — part of the time seriously ill. Claudia hurried back from her visits. Redmayne became the Redmayne of the last few months of Mr. Forrester's life. Nurses were in the house. The doctor's carriage would wait at the door, or be seen moving up and down the drive, the pacing horse turned by the methodical coachman always at the same spot. Clockwork might have regulated the movements of the doctor's carriage. Whipple and his satellites answered enquiries. Mrs. Forrester was about the same. Mrs. Forrester was just about the same. Mrs. Forrester had had a restless night and was not quite so well. Mrs. Forrester seemed a little easier. No, Mrs. Forrester did not seem to suffer. A sort of nervous breakdown. The illness had begun with a chill, the result of a walk in damp woods. Thin soles, Whipple said, on wet grass. Nothing, so it had been thought at first, to signify. But Mrs. Forrester had not picked up as she should. She had not, Whipple thought, been quite the thing for a long time — going on for two years Whipple thought

— and the chill, so to speak, had settled on her nerves.

Ann, in all her lassitude, might have been amused if she had heard. Claudia, if she had heard, would certainly have been amused, her anxieties notwithstanding. She treasured a word of Mrs. Piper's which she did hear — hugged it, hugged herself; retailed it ultimately to Ann on one of her good days, and was rewarded with one of the invalid's rare smiles. Mrs. Piper said, "A chill, and then, the nervous system being run down, complifications."

'Complifications'! The word served as well as another for a disorder for which no name was authoritatively forthcoming. Claudia wondered sometimes whether Dr. Harborough guessed. She had passed through the ordeal of her share of his questionings fairly satisfactorily. She had been away when Mrs. Forrester was taken ill. She knew of no shock that she had lately sustained to account for her condition. The servants, she gathered, knew of none. Mrs. Forrester had apparently been in her usual health till the day when she caught cold. One could not think of any troubles that Mrs. Forrester would be likely to have. Certainly no money troubles. Her loneliness Claudia thought did sometimes depress her. Few people were so alone in the world as she. She had hardly a relation living, and since the death of Mr. Forrester she had lived, Claudia thought, too much by herself. She was not the sort of person who could fill her life with mere social

activities, though from time to time she might take part in them. The adopting of Johnny appeared to show that Mrs. Forrester did feel her loneliness.

Dr. Harborough had said "Ah" to that. He had not looked at Claudia as he said it. He waited for a moment or two, as if on the chance that Claudia would say more. She did not. The pause seemed to her an appreciable pause, but that may have been so only in her imagination. She, like Ann herself, was well schooled — too well schooled to flounder or even to attempt to fill it. Ah, well, rest, Dr. Harborough said, was what Mrs. Forrester needed; rest and, by degrees, the cheerful occupation of her mind. There was nothing organically wrong. The disorder was mental — spiritual, he would almost like to say — rather than physical. It was possible, he would not go so far as to say that it was probable, that the causes might be traced back across the years to what she had gone through at the time of her husband's illness and death. A breakdown of this sort was sometimes postponed. In the ordinary course he should certainly have looked for causes nearer at hand, some recent stress or strain, but as there seemed to have been nothing of the kind . . .

Did he guess? Claudia could not tell. She did not feel, indeed, that it mattered very much if he did. He did not question her about the time Ann had spent abroad. It was significant, perhaps, that he did not. It was a relief to her that he did not think it necessary to call in a second opinion.

"You know her constitution," Claudia said. "You have attended her before."

"Never for anything like this," Dr. Harborough said.

Yet he did not press Claudia — subject her to any exhaustive questioning. She fancied, but may only have fancied, that he saw reasons why a second opinion was to be avoided if possible. It was, however, happily quite plain to her that, as he had said, he did not think a second opinion necessary.

"I believe he guesses," she said to herself. "Perhaps he even knows."

But she could never be quite sure.

Ann lay inert, uninterested, weak, inexpressibly tired. She lay awake, or she slept and woke unrefreshed. There were days when, though it was an effort to her to move, she could not lie still.

"I am so tired," she said to Claudia. "I'm so dreadfully tired."

"Rest," Claudia whispered back. "Rest. You've to do nothing but lie here and rest."

"Resting does n't rest me," Ann said.

One day when they were alone Claudia took it upon her to speak. She chose her moment. The night nurse was off duty. Claudia, coming in to sit with the patient, had sent the day nurse to have her tea with Mrs. Piper. Not the alert, highly trained, educated, experienced, open-eyed young women of these days, with the devil's own knowledge of nerves

and nervous maladies and complexities generally, or Claudia might, indeed, have trembled for Ann's secret — really have felt the apprehension at which she intended in the interests of Ann's health to hint. Ann's nurses were stolid, unimaginative, comfortable women who did their work competently enough, taking their directions from the doctor, accepting his pronouncements, and very little likely to attempt any diagnoses on their own account. They came from the neighbourhood — one from the County Hospital at Windlestone, the other from the Cottage Hospital at Fotheringham. Redmayne was Redmayne. They had known Redmayne all their lives. Mrs. Forrester was Mrs. Forrester. If they hazarded any conjectures as to the nature or the causes of her illness, childlessness was far more likely to have occurred to them as an explanation of it, and of her state generally, than any vaguest suspicion of the truth. Claudia was not really afraid. But Ann must be roused. January was drawing to a close. Ann had been ill eight weeks. Claudia, to whom a crooked way — slightly, harmlessly crooked — came naturally enough, could be direct when she chose. As she had been direct on the night when Ann's face had been ghostlike and her teeth had chattered, so was she direct now. No beatings about the bush for Claudia when she had made up her mind to a course of action.

"I want a little talk with you, Ann Forrester," she said.

Ann turned wearied eyes upon her.

"I'm going to be rather blunt, and, as you may think it, just a little bit cruel."

Ann said nothing, but the eyes opened a little wider.

"Don't imagine that I don't know what you've been suffering. I know only too well. You've been very ill, but the time has come when you've got to get well, and I am going to tell you why."

"Got to get well?"

Ann's lips formed the words. She hardly spoke them.

"Got to get well," Claudia repeated. "Yes, I mean that. You've got to get well. You need n't look at me reproachfully. You need n't pretend that it is n't in your own power. It is. You're not trying. You go on from day to day. You are just not trying. Can you look me in the face and deny it?"

Ann's eyes slowly filled with tears.

"Oh, my goodness," Claudia said, addressing an imaginary witness, "if she does that I shan't be able to go on! But I am going on. She'll be grateful to me afterwards. — You've got to rouse yourself. You've got to make an effort. You've got to be interested again in life — in things outside a sick-room. You've got to wish to get well."

"It's horrible of you, Claudia. After all I've gone through."

"It's because of what you've gone through. It's because of your courage. Not one woman in fifty

could have faced what you've faced without flinching, and not one in a hundred could have carried through what you've carried through. Oh, don't think that I'm surprised that you are ill. I don't know how you've held out. I do not know, Ann. You've taught me a lesson of endurance that I shall remember all my life. Surprised! You've earned your illness" — Claudia paused to smile — "you've earned your illness beyond all question. You've every right to be ill. But you have n't every right, or any right, to jeopardize Johnny's well-being and your own and the well-being of every one connected with you."

"What do you mean, Claudia?"

"Think, Ann."

Ann may or may not have thought. She appealed to Claudia again.

"I don't know what you mean. It's no good saying I am to think. You'll have to tell me."

"Very well," said Claudia, "I'll tell you. Every day that you go on being ill is a menace to Johnny and what you have achieved for him, and what you have achieved for" — she paused — "for all of us. Nobody lives to himself. (I'm not preaching. I'm stating a fact.) We're all involved in this. Redmayne itself. Even — let me say this, Ann! — even your husband. The servants, the people on the estate. The tradesmen who serve you — people, even, like Miss Blondin at the Berlin Wool Shop. They look up to Redmayne, these people. They

have to go on looking up to it. There are places that they don't look up to. Fotheringham is one. Never mind how I know. Perhaps I talk to Mrs. Piper sometimes. Perhaps I should guess without that — though nobody could help liking the lady herself. There are others — one other, anyway — that even you might put a name to, though I know you never see evil anywhere nor believe harm of any one. I don't see why I should n't say Cloistron, though I won't say Cloistron definitely, for I don't like Lady Mallard and I may be prejudiced. (Nonsense, Ann, we're within four walls.) But Redmayne is different. It *is* different. And you are different. And what you have done — I'm not making light of the Commandments — is entirely different. In my heart I can't help feeling that it is because it is so different that you have been allowed — no, I believe you have been helped — to come out of it all un— un— oh, what is the word I want?"

"Don't say unpunished," Ann murmured.

"I was n't going to say unpunished. I was going to say unvanquished, I think—unbeaten. It's more than that really: unscathed. You've come out of it all clean — the biggest thing of all. But that, all the same, is not the point. The point is that you've won, and that your illness, if you go on being ill, threatens all that you've fought for."

She stopped, flushed, a little breathless. It was for Ann to speak now. But Ann did not speak. She lay quite still.

Claudia let a few moments pass and returned to the attack. She must make her meaning plainer, it seemed. So be it.

"Ann," she said.

Ann turned her eyes in Claudia's direction.

"Listen to me. You are in the hands of nurses; does n't that suggest anything to you? — any risk? — any danger?"

Claudia waited, but Ann also waited.

"They've only got to begin to wonder," Claudia said.

Ann did not move or speak.

"Nurses, remember. They know something of illnesses. And they are women."

Silence. Ann gave no sign that she had heard.

"You go on from day to day. They have only got to think of your illness as mysterious. The word 'mysterious' has only got to be applied to it."

Still silence. Claudia could be very patient.

"And to get about — applied to it."

She waited again.

"Mysterious illnesses generally have unusual causes."

Silence. She had not known that Ann could be so obstinate.

"Very well. Can we afford, here, — you, Johnny, all of us, — to let people begin to look about for causes; to wonder even . . . to ask themselves where you were" — she gathered herself up to strike — "from November, say, of the year before last to the

time when you turned up at the Bath Hotel in London?" She bent over Ann. "To remember the advertisement?" Ann's eyes met hers. "To begin to put together the pieces of the puzzle — to know that there is a puzzle to put together? If ever they do begin — if ever they suspect that there is anything to suspect —"

She broke off. Ann had given a little cry. Claudia relaxed. She sank back. Her task was done. She watched Ann weep. She let her weep.

Presently she began to relent.

"I did n't mean to frighten you," she said, but she knew that she had had no other intention. Ann wept on.

"I can't help it," Claudia said to herself. "It was the only thing to do."

Poor Ann. After all, she was ill.

"What a brute I am!" Claudia thought.

"Ann, Ann, darling."

And then she was soothing her as you soothe a frightened child.

"Ann, dearest, it's all right. Nobody suspects. Nobody dreams. Nobody. Not a soul. It's all right, Ann, dear. It's all, all right." Then: "And it's always going to be all right. I feel this. I know it."

Then, with her arms round her: "You're going to. You're going to, are n't you? You're going to begin to get well to-day."

A little pause.

"Are n't you?"

Ann's sobs were lessening.

"Promise?"

Ann caught her breath, sobbed again; but in the end she nodded.

"There's my good Ann. Now I'm going to give you your medicine and then I'm going to read to you. Yes, I am. 'The Ingoldsby Legends.' Now, Ann! You don't want to get me into trouble, do you? I've made you cry. If that comes out I shall never be allowed to sit with you again. Very well, then, — 'The Jackdaw of Rheims.' When Nurse comes back from her tea, I want her to find you laughing."

"If I laugh I may cry," Ann warned her. Was it an admission?

"No, no," Claudia said, "you're not an hysterical subject."

"You've been telling me that I am," Ann answered. "What else have you been drumming into me for the last twenty minutes? Why else have you been bullying me?"

"I believe," Claudia said, — "I do really believe that you're nearly as clever as I am."

CHAPTER VII

In February Ann went to Brighton for change of air. Claudia went with her. There was some talk of taking Johnny. Ann was for taking him, but wiser counsels prevailing (Claudia's), Johnny remained with his nurses at Redmayne, where, as Claudia pointed out, his presence and theirs — to say nothing of his existence, which elsewhere would have still to be accounted for — had ceased long since to attract any attention whatever. Whether or not the unthreatened continuance of conditions so desirable was, indeed, due to Ann's timely recovery, — as engineered by the shrewd and far-sighted Claudia! — it is certain that, as Ann did begin to recover from the day when Claudia had spoken, so did she pay increasing regard to Claudia's admonitions or advice. Claudia saw this, we may be sure, but never presumed upon it.

"Take him about with you when he is five," she said, — "the age, as I have always told you, which people expect an adopted child to be. Your friends have swallowed him whole, baby as he is, but strangers, people in hotels, might n't find him so easy to digest."

Ann said, "Hush, Claudia," though there was no one to hear, but laid Claudia's wisdom to heart.

"Besides," Claudia allowed herself to say, though

her point was gained, "it would be inexpedient, at least, to let it be thought that you could n't bear to be parted from him."

Ann said, "I can't bear to be parted from him."

"All the more reason why you should be," said Claudia.

Brighton, then, for Ann's recovery. At first she went out in a Bath chair. Daily at eleven o'clock her Bath chair would come round to the hotel door. Ann would appear, followed by Zélie with her rugs and her cushions and Claudia with the "Morning Post," and Ann would take her constitutional, Claudia walking beside her. Ann looked so much better now, that there was no fear that the word 'mysterious' would be applied to an illness which was obviously over. Claudia enjoyed the interested looks which never failed to be turned upon them as the chair made its slow progress along the Front. Ann was still a little pale, but no longer looked as if she had been (as Claudia put it to herself) 'through' anything. She might safely now take as long as she liked over her convalescence.

On very sunny mornings, when the day, wind notwithstanding, was said to be warm enough to allow you to sit out, the Bath chair would be drawn up in a more or less sheltered spot, and Claudia would sit on a penny chair beside it. Then, while the Bath chair man, a few yards off, but always within hail, smoked a furtive pipe as he leant against a lamp-post, the two ladies would read the paper,

dividing it between them, wrestling with the fluttering sheets and presently, or even more than once, making a difficult exchange. Claudia always said, "Drat the thing!" when her sheet refused to turn inside out or to fold, and Ann, easily pleased, listened for the words and liked to hear them. There was a day when Ann's portion escaped from her hands, and, eluding Claudia's spasmodic grab, her tentative pursuit, the more whole-hearted pursuit of strangers, and seeming, indeed, for its feints and its ruses, to be possessed by some impish spirit of mischief, flapped itself, after making many persons very ridiculous, over the railing and out to sea. Ann's amusement, tempered as it was by grateful politeness, was evidence of the progress she had made since the day when she had threatened that if she laughed she might cry. She often laughed now. Brighton kept her amused. There were always people to watch. She and Claudia would watch them frankly. Claudia would say, "Look at this!" as she had said about the roses in the garden at Redmayne. And, "Oh, Ann, this!" and, "Coming along now. Don't look up for a moment. No, not yet. Now!"

Ann sometimes said, "How can we both be so silly?" — half meaning how could they both be so vulgar.

But she was enjoying herself, and Claudia was enjoying herself hugely.

"And we're not unkind," Claudia said. "It is n't

as if we said unkind things, or let them see how funny they are. They're proud of themselves. They're bursting with pride. Oh, Ann, this, this Bosom and that Waistcoat!"

"Besides," Claudia generally ended by saying, "it is part of your cure."

So they amused themselves.

They met friends and acquaintances. Ann brightened daily. She liked to see people now.

"When we go back," she said to Claudia, "I think I must give some parties."

That was, once more, a thought that had been forming for some days. Ann, since her husband's death, had on the whole shirked her social duties. She had never greatly cared for what was still in those days called 'Society.' Before her husband's illness altered the conditions of both their lives, they had seldom been alone. At Redmayne and in Scotland guests had succeeded each other endlessly as it seemed to Ann when she looked back, and the beginning of May to the end of July had seen the doors of the house in Curzon Street thrown open. The round had been a little wearisome, and Ann had not been sorry to escape from it. But now she began to wish to see people again. A very good sign, Claudia thought — perhaps the best sign of all.

Soon the Bath chair was discarded. Ann found she could walk. She walked with Claudia then. Sometimes they took what they called quite a walk. In the afternoons they generally drove.

But in all this time one subject was closed between them. Ann, who had regretted Claudia so vehemently on the day when she had seen her off at Whitcombe, for the series of visits which her own illness had cut short, — who, but one half-hour bereft of her, had wished her back so ardently, — had, once she had got her back, asked her none of the questions which then had clamoured for utterance.

It was, or it seemed to be, as it had been before: enough that Claudia should be at hand for a confidence which always might, but perhaps never would, be made.

Claudia on her part had a sense of waiting — always, under the pleasant calm of the days as they went by, each one so like that which had preceded it, a sense of waiting. The apparent uneventfulness of these days did not deceive her. Not indefinitely would this calm last. It was not that she looked for bolts from the blue, or even for a storm. She scanned no horizons. She just waited, thinking her own thoughts, and increasingly aware of her conviction that Coram was not done with, that he had not passed out of Ann's life. One of these days he would come back and then — then what? Then . . . what?

Of one thing at least she was certain. That which would happen then would depend upon Ann. It would depend upon Ann, she believed, far more than it would depend upon Coram. It would depend

almost wholly upon Ann — unless — unless she, Claudia, could contrive that it should depend upon her!

There Claudia paused, thinking furiously. She had her own theory now, cut, dried, garnered, stacked. Woman, where Coram was concerned, was the pursuer, not the pursued. It amounted to no more than that. But the explanation of the whole thing was there; the answer to every question that the extraordinary situation raised. For that (indirectly, perhaps, in one sense, but horribly directly in another) was the rock upon which poor unperceiving Ann had come so unexpectedly to grief. Who, then, so fit to deal with the situation as she, Claudia Nanson, who understood it? And how to let an unconfiding Ann Forrester, an Ann who seemed determined to keep her own counsel, know that she did understand it! She could only wait, adding thus another kind of waiting to that of which she was always conscious now, and which she thought of, not as a pause or a lull, but as a marking of time that with the passing of the days had become almost audible.

What was Ann thinking? She could not tell. Ann seemed now to be living wholly in the present. She watched for the daily letter from Poulton informing her of Johnny's welfare. She appeared to have no other anxiety, and that, set duly at rest by a bulletin, which, so healthy was Johnny, hardly

varied at all, she was able to interest herself in the day's quiet occupations and amusements.

But what was she really thinking?

Or was she just not thinking?

Or was she, also, waiting?

Ann was waiting, and knew it. She, like Claudia, caught faint echoes, through the pleasant, unimportant days, of a distant sound of tramping. That was the sound of the marking of time. Events in their march had come to a halt, but the halt was only temporary. Presently the march would be resumed.

So the sun shone, and the winds blew, and the days passed.

One night Ann had a dream. She thought she was at Redmayne. She thought she was in the library. But she was not exactly at Redmayne, nor exactly in the library either, for she was also somehow still at Brighton. The Front seemed to run through the library. She could see the furniture and the walls and some of the pictures, — notably the Romney over the fireplace, — but she could see the railings and the sea and the pier, and she could hear a certain piano organ which haunted the King's Road, and which, though it had, it is to be supposed, the usual number of changes to its repertory, always seemed when you heard it to be playing one air from "La Fille de Madame Angot." Tum, tum, tiddle-um; tum, tum, tiddle-um; tum, tum,

tum, tum, tum, tum, tum. Well might the tune (as Ann thought even in her dreaming) jig in her head. It seemed quite natural that, though she was at Redmayne and in the library, she should be at Brighton also. The hands were the hands of Esau, the voice the voice of Jacob, but she felt no surprise. She knew, indeed, that she was dreaming. The room, which was also the Front, was thronged with moving people. They passed her in endless procession. Most of those persons who, by their appearance or their demeanour, or who, for this or that reason, had amused or interested her or Claudia, were there. The Waistcoat was amongst them, and the big-bosomed Jewess, — many big-bosomed Jewesses, — her eye perhaps habituated to the type and so reproducing it automatically; and a little man who had run after her newspaper and said, "There now!" when it had flown over the railing and out to sea; and her Bath-chair man; and others and others. There were people that she had seen abroad also. The kind Paris doctor. He was walking with Mrs. Piper. But she felt no alarm. She felt no alarm even when as they passed she heard the word 'Complications.' Nothing was going to 'come out.' Disgrace was not to be her portion. She knew that as Claudia knew it — knew it sleeping, it seemed, as well as waking, so that if it had been Johnny's foster mother whom she had seen, or some one from the little French city of refuge, and talking, say, to Whipple or to Lady Mallard or to Lady Fotheringham or to

Miss Blondin, she knew that she still would have felt no alarm. Her dream — she thought about it as she dreamt it — was not frightening. Presently, as she looked, one figure singled itself out from the rest. This figure, the procession coming to an end as suddenly as it had begun, remained behind. Now there was only this figure — a girl — and herself, and, as the last of the others passed out of sight, the library became wholly the library, the sea disappearing, the railings, the jutting pier, and Ann knew that she was at Redmayne.

The girl was Lucy Edget, the kitchen-maid who had got into trouble and who had been dismissed.

"Now, Lucy," Ann heard herself saying, "I had, of course, to part with you. The circumstances demanded it. There were the other servants to think of, discipline, the example, a dozen things. I could do nothing else. But Mrs. Thomas tells me that up to the time when I parted with you you had always borne a good character. The shock to her and to Mrs. Piper and to all in the house was thus the greater. You were, I believe, a good girl. There are plenty of bad girls, but you were different. You were, were n't you? Now, Lucy, do you think you could tell me how it came that you, a good girl, got into trouble?"

Ann was waiting for Lucy's answer when she woke.

But Ann thought of Lucy after she woke. She recalled her very distinctly — a chubby-faced girl

who had sat at the end of the row of women servants at prayers, where a moon-faced Bessy sat now. Mrs. Thomas, the cook, engaged her own kitchen-maids, and if Ann learnt to know them by name that was as far as she ever approached towards their acquaintance. But for some reason she had noticed Lucy, had spoken to her and had spoken of her to Mrs. Piper. "I like that girl," she had said, and Mrs. Piper had said, "Yes, 'm, a nice well-mannered young person and very well-behaved, so Mrs. Thomas informs me. Steady, 'm — the best quality in young girls."

Afterwards Mrs. Piper, recalling the incident, had said: "Steady was my word, 'm, if you remember — which was, indeed, what every one thought her. But there, 'm, you never can know."

Ann had agreed that you never could know. But that, as Ann remembered now, was before she herself had known anything. You never could know? No, you never *could* know! She had not any doubt now that Lucy, who had been thought to be steady, had been steady.

She lay in the dark thinking.

What, or rather where, was the actual line between goodness and that which she had always thought of as badness? Was there, indeed, such a line at all?

She lay very still in the dark. In it, and in the silence which seemed part of it, she could hear faintly the recurring sound of the waves breaking on the

shore. Now came the thud, and now, and now; spaced; regular as the beat of a pendulum. She thought of the deserted length of the Front in the darkness; and of Redmayne in the darkness; and — the idea of darkness probably contributing its influence — of the waiting boy in the darkness of the wood . . .

Was the waiting boy waiting for every one? For Lucy Edget, as for her? For her, as for Lucy Edget? Waiting in the darkness to leap out of the darkness? To surprise you into deeds which you did not know you had it in you to do? Was the waiting boy in yourself? — in each one of us?

She woke in the morning to the thought of Lucy Edget, and to wish that the question she had put to her so elaborately, yet so clearly, had not remained unanswered. She remembered the exact words in which, summing up what had gone before, she had framed it.

"Now, Lucy, do you think you could tell me how it came that you, a good girl, got into trouble?"

She believed that Lucy, if she would, could have told her.

CHAPTER VIII

CLAUDIA rose one morning with what she described to herself as a feeling that something was going to happen. She looked out of her window and saw the sea shining in the sun. The day sparkled. For once nothing flapped. The wind had gone down. What breeze there was did no more than stir the flag upon the flagstaff which Claudia could see from where she stood. She opened her window and knew that the first promise of spring was in the air and that every living thing was in some way responding to it. Birds were twittering. Boys were whistling. The very barking of the dogs sounded different. Even the piano organ of the King's Road, bursting suddenly into the inevitable "Fille de Madame Angot" right under her window, was in key with the joyous note of the day. How the tune, which one could not escape, jigged! How it jigged! Claudia's fingers drummed upon the pane in time to the gay jigging of it. She stayed them suddenly, reminded of other fingers that once had drummed upon a pane. But in a moment or two they were drumming again. She wanted to dance. What a smiling, twinkling day! What a sky — little fleecy clouds in it! What a sea — little white sails on it! She dressed leisurely, returning again and again to the window. Now it was a passing luggage-laden omnibus which she

paused to watch; now a child bowling its hoop; now a riding-master and his pupils. Nothing actually in the day, nothing certainly in the sights which it presented to her, to presage happenings; but she had sense continually of the imminence of change. There had been a standing-still; there was going to be movement.

All the morning she had a sense of expectancy. Ann and she did shopping. Claudia absently hummed little tunes as she walked.

Ann, noting the humming but not the preoccupation, said, "You're in very good spirits!"

"Don't you feel something, Ann? — something in the air?"

If she had said 'anything' for 'something' Ann might have looked at her and seen her preoccupation.

"If one did n't know that March was before one —"

"Oh, I don't mean that," said Claudia; "something more than that. Though that," she added, "may be partly why I was humming."

Impossible to leave out altogether the influences of the day itself, since these, represented by a softness and a warmth that were yet stimulating and enlivening, marked, or seemed to mark, a turning-point in the year. They had their effect very truly upon her spirits; but it was not these that gave her the feelings with which she had awaked and which,

as the hours went by uneventfully, increased rather than diminished in fervency. Something was going to happen.

"Now," said Ann, "the Library. Let us go and choose some books."

Always a pleasure to Claudia the choosing of books at the Library. She liked to sit waiting for what should be brought to her of the books on the list, or, better still, to explore the shelves for what should take her fancy. This morning neither she nor Ann had brought a list. It would be a question of choosing from the shelves. Zélie later in the day would return the volumes which were done with, exchanging them for those which should be decided upon now, and which would be tied up and put aside in readiness for her. But this morning Claudia could not concentrate her attention even upon the shelves.

"Ann, you choose," she said. "I don't think there is anything that I particularly want to read."

Ann went to the bookshelves. The newest books were on a shelf by themselves, but somehow it was not new books that you looked for at this Library. Here at this time were names popular then, almost forgotten now. Here were names hardly known then, to-day acclaimed. Here were names famous then, famous, a few of them, still. In sets of threes the volumes asked your suffrages, some pathetically your sufferance. You said of such and such a book that it was very pretty, of such and such an author

that he had written himself out. But, on the whole, you were very tolerant. Ann, a little in advance of her times, had discovered George Meredith for herself, and, more recently, in "Far from the Madding Crowd," Thomas Hardy. Claudia frankly liked Ouida (who was thought rather shocking and was read stealthily by the young and furtively by their elders) and the author of "Guy Livingstone."

Claudia left Ann to the shelves. Some magazines lay on a counter and she went over and looked at them: "Temple Bar," "Cornhill," "All-the-Year-Round," "Belgravia," "The Argosy." There were also "The Sunday at Home," "The Quiver," and "The Leisure Hour." Humbler piles showed "The Family Herald," "The London Journal," "The London Reader," and "Bow Bells." An old lady was buying books for her grandchildren. She gave to one "Fern's Hollow," by the author of the "Children of Cloverley"; to another, "The Fishers of Darby Haven"; to a third, "Jessica's First Prayer." Claudia, looking at the pictures in "Bow Bells," found her attention wandering. Presently she was at the door of the shop. Then she was in the porch and looking at a windowful of the black cards with the white designs upon them which just then it was the fashion to illuminate. They, like the novels which you approved, were thought very pretty. There were crosses wreathed with forget-me-nots or convolvulus, or anchors with lilies-of-the-valley or texts in fancy lettering, or mere bouquets of flow-

ers. And then she was out in the street itself, and then, quite suddenly and with a thumping heart (and, as she put it to herself, no time to think), she was off — off in pursuit of a back which she knew — knew in her bones almost before she saw it — to be the back of Timothy Coram.

This was what the strange day had portended! Timothy Coram was home again. Timothy Coram was here in Brighton. Timothy Coram was walking a few yards ahead of her. What was she going to do?

Speak to him? Yes, she supposed she was going to speak to him. For the moment what she had to do was to keep him in sight. That filled the immediate present, for the pavements were crowded. How crowded they were! Brighton was as crowded as London. The sunshine and the mildness had brought every one out. Perambulators ought not to be allowed on the footpaths. She begged some one's pardon and some one said 'Granted.' People stopped just in front of you, or people even turned about directly in your way. And what was she going to do? What was she really going to do? She must make up her mind. Yes, speak to him, of course; that was settled. But how — in what manner? What was her attitude towards him? What was Ann's attitude? She must not compromise Ann's potential attitude by her own. Goodness! Goodness! She had had a year and a half for thought and

she had not thought. She was as unprepared as if there had been nothing to prepare for. She should have sounded Ann. All this time she should have been engaged in sounding her.

Timothy Coram walked on. Claudia, though she had to walk fast, could have overtaken him if she had been ready. If she was not ready it must suffice that she should keep him in sight. She saw people she knew, friends of Ann's, bearing upon her. Nobody must stop her. But Colonel Worthington-Smith admired her and said, "How do you do?" and Mrs. Worthington-Smith, who was obedient to her lord's smallest wish, said, "How do you do?" And Claudia, in spite of herself, said, "How do you do?" And Claudia, her eye on a diminishing back, said, "Yes, lovely." And, "Yes, like a spring day, is n't it?" — but shook herself free with a jerky "I *have* to hurry on. Mrs. Forrester is waiting for me. You will excuse me, won't you?" Two surprised "Good-byes" followed her. Ann's friends would probably meet Ann. But it could n't be helped. Timothy Coram had made thirty yards by their tiresomeness. He was crossing the road. A carriage and then a butcher's cart delayed her own crossing. He had made forty yards now, perhaps fifty. Was she going to lose him?

People turned their heads after the hurrying lady. No. He had paused to look into a shop window. She was gaining upon him. He moved on. It was like the chase of Ann's newspaper.

And Ann still with the books. Had she missed her yet? What would she think had become of her? Goodness, goodness, as if it mattered! Time enough for all that. What she had got to think about as the precious moments went by was what she was going to do.

"Let me get that into my silly head," she said to herself impatiently. "Let me make up my mind if I have one!"

And somewhere a letter — or the dust or the ashes of a letter. And, at Redmayne, Johnny Smith in his perambulator, or Poulton's arms, or his cradle . . .

And nothing settled.

She could not think. Her brain refused to work for her. She hurried on, blindly.

He was turning into the King's Road. She ran a few steps when he had safely turned the corner.

He was walking more slowly now. Near Mutton's, which she feared he might be making for for an early luncheon, he crossed over to the Front. It was now or never. Claudia hurried on, crossed some little way ahead of him, and was walking demurely and with downcast eyes, when some one, who turned out to be Mr. Coram, hesitated, stopped, and spoke her name.

"Mrs. Nanson. It is Mrs. Nanson."

No one was ever more taken by surprise than Claudia!

"Mr. Coram!"

They looked at each other.

She had made no pretence of not remembering him; he made none of having expected not to be remembered. Each thought, and knew that the other thought, of the circumstances of their last meeting and parting.

"And you are not the other side of the world!" she said. Something stupid had to be said. "I thought you were in . . . where did I think you were?" She gave a little laugh. "I don't know where I thought you were."

"I got back ten days ago. I have an old aunt here — my nearest relation. I came down yesterday to see her."

"Have you been to Redmayne?"

He shook his head.

"Nobody knows I'm back yet. I hardly knew I meant to come back, myself, till I sailed. I made up my mind at a few hours' notice."

"You did something like that once before," Claudia said to herself.

She thought there was a pause before he said, "How is Mrs. Forrester?"

"Oh, much better," said Claudia.

"She's been ill!"

"Yes, but she's much better. Indeed, she is quite well again."

She was wondering whether he knew of Johnny — whether Mr. Bulkley had told him. But she was wondering so many things: What he was thinking.

To what extent he supposed her to be in Ann's confidence. How, now that she saw him again, Ann *could* have let him go! (But Ann had n't thought he would go. That was the point. Let her, for goodness' sake, try to keep to it — try to remember.) She had control of her wits now, but not quite of her mind, which, working once more, seemed to work on its own account.

He was speaking again.

"You see her sometimes, I suppose?"

"I see her constantly."

"At Redmayne, you mean,"

"At Redmayne and here."

"Mrs. Forrester is here?"

Something had come into his face, and into his voice.

"I left her ten minutes ago."

There was no doubt about the pause which followed that. Claudia did not break it. She knew now that she had no plan. For the moment things must take their course.

"Which way are you going?" he said presently.

"I was only taking the air," Claudia said.

"May I walk with you a few yards?"

"Shall we go this way?" Claudia said, turning round. She did not want to meet Ann yet.

They walked in the direction of Hove.

Brighton hummed about them. The sea shone and sparkled. Children and their nurses were on the beach. You would not have been surprised to see

bathers. Claudia thought of the bathers at Fotheringham. A lifetime seemed to have passed since she and Ann had laughed at their bobbings and dippings and splashings. Something had happened to Ann that day; she had never known what. A strange, restless Ann had come back from a cheerful and apparently uneventful drive. And it was from that day that, gathering impetus like waters nearing the weir, events had hurried smoothly to catastrophe.

And the man beside whom she was walking did not know of any catastrophe at all. What he did know of he would not, she supposed, look upon in the light of a catastrophe. Her letter, she was sure, had not reached him.

For a few moments as she walked she was near crying. When she thought of what Ann had suffered, what Ann had faced, what Ann had conquered, she could have screamed. The woman is broken on the wheel and the man goes free. The woman takes up her cross and carries it to her own Calvary, and the man does not so much as know that the tree has been planted from which the cross was to be made. For a space measured in time by a few seconds, in action by a few steps, she hated the man and could have killed him — hated all men for his sake.

And if he saw he would know. And whatever happened he must not know. The urgency of the need for self-control helped her to a mastery of her feelings.

The two walked on. An approaching goat-car-

riage on the other side of the railing caught Claudia's eye, and she fixed her attention on it while she steadied her thoughts. A boy led the goat. A proud little girl sat in the carriage. A complacent mother walked behind. The little girl, as they passed, grinned in their faces. Claudia felt better.

Coram was talking, and she began to hear what he was saying. He was talking of Redmayne. She began to hear names; Bulkley's name, once or twice; Whipple's, Mrs. Piper's.

"Mrs. Piper still has her cough?"

She heard that and answered it — even contriving a smile.

"She never forgets it for long," she said.

"I've wished I could hear it again."

"You will," she said, to her surprise, for it was as if to comfort him that she said that. "It never gets better," she added. Why if she hated him should she wish to console him? And how, or rather why, did she know suddenly that he was unhappy? But she did know it. Even as she knew that, though he talked of Mrs. Piper, it was Ann he wanted to talk of — Ann that he really was talking of. He was talking of her when he talked of Piper and Piper's cough, when he talked of Whipple, when he talked of Bulkley.

"It also never gets worse," she said. "It never will."

"Nothing is changed."

But she knew that everything was changed. And

that brought her again to Johnny. Surely he must know of Johnny. Bulkley, if he wrote to him, must have told him. He probably had other correspondents, too, who must have told him. That he did not know who Johnny was, however, she was quite, quite sure. She thought rapidly — her mind was working for her obediently now — and decided to speak of Johnny at once. On every account she would speak of Johnny, if only to make certain that he knew of his existence. If Ann should see him — if she should consent, as Claudia was determined that she should, to see him — it was expedient that she should be under no uncertainty upon this point.

"Oh, one change," she said. "You heard of Johnny Smith? You know that Mrs. Forrester has adopted a child?"

"Yes. That's one of the things I want to hear about. But I want to hear about everything. I feel as if I had been away a hundred years."

No, he did not know who Johnny was.

"I advised it," Claudia said. She felt safe now. "Ann — Mrs. Forrester — is rather a lonely woman. I think an interest was what she wanted, and Johnny has certainly been a success. She is devoted to him. He is a dear little boy. She is the sort of woman who ought to have had children. I think, though she did n't know it, that it had always been a disappointment to her in her married life that she had none. It must certainly have been a disappointment to Mr. Forrester."

"I suppose it was," said Coram.

They took a few steps in silence. Claudia allowed herself a glance at his face. She was going to have no difficulty. When he spoke he was following the train of thought upon which she had started him.

"I suppose it was," he said again. "He was an odd man in some ways. You never quite knew what he was thinking. He lived a sort of separate life. But he must have wished for a son. Every one must wish" — he hesitated and resigned himself to a phrase — "must wish to hand on the torch."

She waited for the inevitable question. It came. For once it was welcome.

"Oh, well," she said, "we have a sort of an idea. We saw — it was understood rather — that one must n't enquire too closely. There were several answers to the advertisement. We went up to London and saw two or three children. We both fell in love with Johnny. He wanted a home, and we wanted him. That settled it."

That settled other things also — all that she need do, for example, in the matter of preparation. Nor had she departed by a hair's breadth from the truth, wide of the real truth as was the impression which her words were intended to convey or confirm. She might smile to herself now, and she did, if a little wanly. She had left Ann free to do as she liked — to enlighten him or leave him in darkness as seemed good to her. Her immediate part was done.

She felt suddenly tired.

"Shall we sit down for a moment?" she said.

"Was I walking too fast for you? I walk so much by myself that I forget sometimes."

"No; but we will sit for a little and then I must be going back. What time is it?"

"Oh," he said, "you don't want to know the time yet — Please! There are so many things I want to hear about. I have seen no one from — I was going to say home. No one connected with Redmayne. I still think of the little old house there as my home. It was my home for so many years. I still grudge it to Bulkley."

"Why did you leave it?" Claudia said to herself. "My good man, why did you leave it?" Aloud she said, "What is the time?"

It was ten minutes to one.

"Ten minutes, then. And then I must be getting back to Mrs. Forrester, who will think I am lost, and to luncheon. What do you want to know?"

She could look at him frankly now. He was what the novels of those days, and of many a day after, perhaps, called, and loved to call, 'bronzed,' and Claudia thought him, and admitted to herself, and later to Ann, that she thought him comelier than ever. There was a little network of lines about his eyes that she had not observed before, but this did not make him look older. The eyes themselves had something of the look that sailors' eyes have — the look of having gazed over vast blue spaces. She did

not suppose that even a very large proportion of the time that he had been away on his travels had been spent at sea, but the look was there. It, like the little network of lines that yet did not age him, was somehow disarming. She could not hate him. There was a plea somewhere. She could conceive that one might love him very much. And then she felt once more that she had the key to how 'it,' to how everything, had happened.

"What do you want to know?" she said again.

He startled her with her own word.

"Everything," he said. "And about everything. "I'm like Rip Van Winkle after his years of sleep in the Kaatskill Mountains."

"Everything?" Claúdia said, — "in ten minutes?"

He looked at her slowly.

"What I want to know — what I really want to know, you could tell me in less than that."

The goat-carriage was coming back. Claudia heard the jangle of the goat's bells behind her. She turned her head. The child grinned again, looked from her to Coram, and cried, "Dad-dee!" The mother said, "Hush, darling. That's not Papa!" Claudia turned rather quickly and asked Coram what it was she could tell him.

But he did not seem able quite at once to ask her what he wanted to know. He was probably wondering again how far she was in Ann's confidence, or whether she was in Ann's confidence at all. He upon

his part, as she upon hers, had to beware lest Ann should be compromised by words which might be admissions — indications even. He possibly knew that Claudia was clever. She was clever enough to perceive his difficulty and to help him. After all, she had knowledge which she might own to — knowledge which was common to them both. She had been present at that last dinner at Redmayne (should she ever forget it?) and had been witness to emotions which, whether she had Ann's confidence or not, she had been at liberty to interpret as she would. She might, at least, be supposed to have thought that perhaps he was in love with Ann and prevented (as she had, indeed, thought!) by conventional reasons from 'speaking.' She would assume so much, anyway.

"You want to see Ann," she said, and (the formal seventies not days of Christian names) corrected the Ann, as before, to 'Mrs. Forrester.'

He responded at once, at once perceiving that what he had been trying to ask — which was, of course, whether Ann would see him — was to be ignored.

"I want greatly to see Mrs. Forrester."

He looked both his relief and his gratitude.

"I will tell her I met you," Claudia said.

He saw that she meant that she could not do more than that.

"I'll give you my address. I am staying in Brunswick Square. No. 99. I'll write it down."

"I shall remember."

But he wrote the address down on a leaf which he tore from his pocket-book. He folded the paper and gave it to her. His hand trembled.

Presently they were retracing their steps. They were both almost silent now. Afterwards she remembered that she had asked him nothing about his travels. Opposite Regency Square she stopped and put out her hand. Something seemed to have been said in the silence — nay, by the silence, by the very fact of their joint silence — some further point reached.

"Make her see me," he said.

One of her rings pressed so deeply into her finger that she nearly squealed. She bore the pain, and, accepting what the silence had shown, promised to do her best. They parted then — he to walk over the downs, urged by Heaven knew what of restlessness and excitement; she to seek Ann.

CHAPTER IX

BUT something else had happened.

Ann met her with a white face, and for a moment Claudia thought that she knew. She seemed to be waiting for her. She was talking to the manager through the window of the office, which faced the door, and had turned at his "Here *is* Mrs. Nanson," and hurried towards her.

"Where *have* you been? I thought you'd never come in. Johnny's ill."

She thrust a telegram into Claudia's hand, but told her its contents before Claudia could read them. Congestion of the lungs. Johnny's little lungs . . . that baby's! No immediate danger. But would they have said that if there was n't danger?

"What would you like to do, Claudia? I'm going by the next train — there's one at three. And Zélie will follow with the luggage. Will you come with me, or would you rather wait?"

"Go with you," said Claudia. "Of course I'll go with you."

They were hurrying across the hall. "I can't go in to luncheon. I've ordered something — some cold chicken upstairs. Zélie will pack for you afterwards. Oh, Claudia . . ."

Claudia pressed the hand she held, murmuring endearments, encouragements, exhortations. "You'll

find he's better, Ann. I know we shall find him better."

"If I could feel that it was n't a judgment on me," said Ann — "that he was n't suffering for me." She bit her lip to keep back the tears. "That's where I could be hit if I have n't been punished enough."

"Ann, Ann. It is n't a question of punishment."

"I don't know," said Ann.

It was not a moment in which to speak of Coram. Claudia saw that she must wait. She went to her own room, ostensibly to put together what she wanted for the journey, actually to write a note which she must contrive to despatch to Brunswick Square before she left. Poor Ann, poor Johnny — poor Timothy also!

"A telegram," she wrote, "has called us back to Redmayne. The little boy, Johnny, is ill." She paused considering how best to let him know that this sudden move had nothing to do with the events of the morning. To say so was not only to admit to some degree, at least, of Ann's confidence, but also to involve her in a sort of partisanship with his cause. Well, she had committed herself to the first with her "You want to see Ann" (as the later silence had proved), and to the second, though not irrevocably, by her subsequent promise. So she stated baldly that she had not been able to tell Ann that she had seen him, and said, wondering a little to what

further she was pledging herself, that she would write to him again from Redmayne.

She slipped from her room, managed to get hold of a messenger, and was back with Ann in less than ten minutes.

The journey was dreadful. Ann spoke or was silent. Claudia did not know which was the more dreadful, her words or her silence. She was possessed now with the idea of punishment. The story of David and the child was in her mind and on it. In vain did Claudia point out that Ann had put no one in the forefront of a battle. God loved David, Ann said, but the child died.

"Don't be silly," Claudia said, goaded to impatience, though she knew that for the time being Ann was not mistress of her thoughts. "You might as well say that you ought to wear a Scarlet Letter."

"I think it is because I don't," said Ann.

They came as near to quarrelling as perhaps they had ever come. But if at the moment, lest her impatience should get the better of her, she had to remind herself of what Ann had gone through, Claudia in her heart understood. The conditions were still those which had caused Ann's own illness. Nerves had been overwrought, strength overtaxed. Who had excuse for unreasonableness, for perversity even, if not poor Ann, who sat looking out of the window refusing to be comforted?

Claudia, at the other end of the carriage, looked out of her window. Her irritation soon passed, turning wholly into the pity of which it was more than half composed. She saw houses, trees, fields, — sea-gulls, twice, in the wake of a plough, — but what she was conscious of was not these, but the forlornness of Ann's attitude. Though she did not look in her direction, nothing of the poignancy of this escaped her. Ann did not move. Her hands lay in her lap. Her stillness was more distressing than any restlessness.

And to Claudia — a question thus answering itself for her — there was a dangerous quality in Ann's extreme quiescence. It was unnatural. It meant that Ann was not herself restored to health. Nothing was going to be discovered, nothing was going to be guessed or suspected . . . unless Ann . . . Ann herself . . .

Claudia was back with the difficulties she had thought disposed of once for all on a day when she had 'upped' and spoken.

If Ann went on like this at Redmayne . . .

The wheels of the carriage took up the tune.

The sea-gulls Claudia had seen in ploughed fields gave place to rooks, and rooks moved about the old nests in some bare trees. She imagined but could not hear cawings. The sunshine was thinner now,

but there was still sunshine. There were lambs in one field. Spring was coming.

She had it in her power to rouse Ann. Should she use this power which she had? She had but to say that Coram was back and something would happen. What, however, would the something be which would happen? Ann in her present mood was capable of anything: of refusing to see him, which was no more than was to be expected, perhaps; of refusing to allow Claudia to communicate with him — which, as capable of leading to endless embarrassments, was a contingency not lightly to be courted. No, the time was not yet. She must wait for the right moment. She must hope to recognize it when it came.

She looked, and knew that she looked, herself a little forlorn now. She half hoped that Ann would see. Her own eyes were turned as despondently as Ann's to the passing landscape, her face was averted from Ann as Ann's from her. Her hands were in her muff. She was as still as Ann. But Ann did not see.

A dreadful journey. There were two changes, but not even these broke the spell. It was not till they were approaching Windlestone that Ann, racked now by anxiety as to what news might await her, became human.

With a human Ann Claudia could deal.

The brougham was waiting; Charles, the footman,

rugs on his arm, was on the platform. A look told her that Johnny was not dead.

If anything there was a slight improvement, Charles said. The doctor, who had paid his second visit that day, was not coming again till the morning. Claudia rather than Ann asked the questions. Once inside the carriage, Ann cried. There, behind the two backs, Ann might cry as she might have cried in the train. Claudia welcomed the sight of her tears. Her arm went round her and Ann did not draw herself away.

Here, yes, as much as she liked. Let the easing tears flow.

"Ann, may I say something now?"

Ann nodded.

"I know what it is," she said.

"I need n't say it?"

"I 'm his adopted mother."

"Yes, Ann, that's it."

"The fears and anxieties of an adopted mother if he lives, and just the amount of grief an adopted mother might be supposed to feel if he dies."

"Yes, Ann."

"'East Lynne.' Madame Vine," Ann said.

Claudia smiled through her own tears. Ann was quite human now. She was not going to do anything foolish.

Poor little Johnny. Improvement or no, he was pretty bad. He was like some little sick animal, or

some little sick bird, the beating of whose pulses is visible. He lay, wrapped in shawls on Poulton's lap, breathing fast — breathing short — and now and then giving a little cough. His cheeks were flushed. His eyes were neither quite open nor quite shut.

The sight of him wrung Claudia's heart. What, then, must it be to Ann! Yet, if she had still feared for Ann, the sadness of the picture would have held its own reassurance, for so pitiful was the sight of the little child that Ann, she would have perceived, might safely, if she must, have shown her deepest feelings. Ann took Johnny on to her lap from Poulton's.

Claudia, confident as she was, turned away.

In the night, when Poulton had with difficulty been persuaded to take the few hours' sleep she must need so badly, Ann sat by the nursery fire with the little child in her arms, and Claudia sat beside her. They talked in low tones, or they were silent. But, though the strain of anxiety was upon them, there was nothing dreadful now in their speech or their silence. Something akin to contentment held them both, and held them together. Claudia had never felt so near to Ann, never felt Ann to be so near to her. Ann, with her child at her heart, anguished for his suffering, but there to minister to him, knew some sort of happiness in all her sorrow.

"My little boy," she murmured, "my little son." She had him close. She was trying to give her life to

him, Claudia trying in her own way to give hers to Ann.

Sometimes Johnny would stir. He would clench his little hands, and move his head from side to side. Then, perhaps, would come the cough, or a little choking sound. Ann and Claudia each held her own breath till he got his. Ann would raise him.

The frightening moment would pass. The muscles of the two watchers would relax. The clock, and Ann's watch, which lay on a table beside her, would seem to resume their ticking.

Sometimes there would be a knock at the door and Claudia would rise and go over on tiptoe — on tiptoe rather because it was the middle of the night than because her light footfalls could have disturbed Johnny — and would whisper to whichever of the anxious servants it might be who had come for tidings, or to see if anything was wanted. Nothing was wanted, but it was good to know of the anxiety.

The nursery-maid came, Zélie, who had arrived in the course of the evening, and, severally, two of the housemaids. At three o'clock there was a fifth knock. Ann looked up from Johnny's face which she was observing closely. Claudia tiptoed once more to the door and opened. Mrs. Piper herself. Mrs. Piper in a pink flannel dressing-gown — because she was so anxious and could not sleep.

Mrs. Piper was admitted.

"Come in, Mrs. Piper," Ann called to her, and

when it was Mrs. Piper who tiptoed, Claudia walked in the ordinary way.

"How is he going on, 'm? I felt I must see." She bent over the child.

Ann and Claudia hung upon what she should say.

"Not so flushed," she said, "and, surely, 'm, breathing freer?"

"*You* think so?" Ann said. "I've been thinking that, wanting to let myself think it, for some moments. Claudia, I do think he is. Look, he is n't breathing so fast."

Encouragement had come into the room with Mrs. Piper. Ann felt it. Claudia felt it. Claudia sent a thought flying to Coram at Brighton.

"You do think so?" Ann said to the pink flannel dressing-gown, and to something else which was vaguely unfamiliar in Mrs. Piper's appearance.

"Yes, 'm, I'm sure of it. Altogether and easier."

It was not only an opinion, but it came from outside.

"He's going to live," Ann said.

"Of course he's going to live," said Claudia.

"I think you're all helping him," Ann said, unsteadily.

Silence settled down on the house after Mrs. Piper's visit. There had been silence before, but this was a deeper silence. It was like the silence that comes when snow is falling and that you feel will not be broken. There would be no more visits now till

Poulton came back at six o'clock. The room seemed to shut itself off from all the other rooms. Claudia made up the fire. Ann watched her putting on the coal lump by lump.

"I never knew it was a front," Claudia said, laying down the tongs.

Ann was astray.

"Oh, Piper," she said after a moment. "Yes, a front. I don't know that I did either. I suppose I never thought about it."

She thought about it now.

"Of course, if I had, I must have known," Ann said, as if there had been no interval. "It has n't changed in all the years. It has n't grown thinner. It has n't grown grey. Piper must be between sixty and seventy."

Claudia nodded thoughtfully.

Presently Ann added: "So that's what it was!"

Claudia said, "Yes?"

"The difference," Ann said. "Why she looked so odd. I thought it was the dressing-gown."

"No, the front," Claudia said. "That was what was so significant."

Nothing further was said for the moment. Claudia set about preparing Johnny's food, which had to be administered every two hours. She warmed it over a spirit lamp. Ann, rocking Johnny, listened to the soft hissing of the flame.

Johnny was better, certainly Johnny was better. If only in the way that, this time, he fought against

his food, he showed himself better. Before he had submitted. His 'goodness,' which was unnerving, had been the measure of his illness. Now he turned his head this way and that, pushed, cried. But at last he was fed, or, at any rate, what he had swallowed was held to be enough. He lay crying then in Ann's lap and Ann rocked him, sang to him, soothed him. She smiled at Claudia when at length — at very long length — he slept.

"Won't you go and lie down, Claudia? He'll be all right now. And I shall be all right."

"No, Ann, thank you. I'm not a bit tired. Why should I be?"

"You must be worn out."

Claudia thought of another night when she had watched with Ann, and when she had, indeed, been worn out.

She shook her head.

"You would n't lie down, yourself?" she said. "Trust him to me? I'd promise to call you if I was the least uneasy."

But Ann in turn shook hers.

Another hour passed. Johnny was sleeping quietly.

Claudia, moving noiselessly, made some tea. She brought a cup to Ann. Something dissolved in Ann, the last remnant of hardness. She drew Claudia's face down to hers, as once she had bent hers to Claudia's.

"I was so horrid in the train," she whispered.

"Oh, stuff!" Claudia said softly, her face against

Ann's. A moment or two passed. Then: "Drink your tea," she said.

They drank their tea in silence, but Claudia knew that Ann had more to say and that she herself was waiting. The silence lasted some minutes.

"I was more horrid than you knew," Ann said. "I can only think now that I was n't in my proper senses."

She bent over Johnny and then raised her face. "I wanted to hurt — myself — but also I just wanted to hurt. I'd made up my mind that if I found my baby dead, I'd acknowledge him then and there, proclaim myself, pull Redmayne down about my ears."

Claudia nodded.

"Insane! Stupid!" Ann said. "I see that now. Childish! I could n't even have done it. It would n't have been possible, for I could n't have proclaimed myself without proclaiming some one else, and how was I to have done that?"

"Yes, I saw that you could n't really," Claudia said.

"Of course I could n't," said Ann.

"But you made me afraid, all the same," said Claudia. "I admit that, Ann, though I won't let you say you were horrid. The danger was that you might have committed yourself before you saw what it would entail. If just for one moment you had lost your head! Do you see?"

"You need n't be afraid any more," Ann said.

There was a long pause after that. Ann looked down again at Johnny. If he had died! The despair which had held her in its grip on the journey, and which she had visited upon Claudia, was past, but black as her mood had been — perverse, mad, bad! — even now she could understand it. As she looked at the sleeping child and knew him to be restored to her, she could certainly understand it. He for her. His life for her. That was how she must have thought of Johnny's death if he had died. No escape for her from that if he had died, because once — before he was born, that was — his death, as she had perceived all too well, and as Claudia must have perceived also, would, indeed, have been a solution. Oh, she understood her despair well enough, if, thank God, it was past. She put the remembrance of it from her.

She looked up. Claudia seemed to have put the remembrance of it from her also. She was speaking. She had gone back to Piper. Ann began to hear what she was saying.

"Up out of her bed in the middle of the night. If that had been all. But without her front. I don't suppose any one this side of the baize door has ever seen her without it before."

It was Claudia now who seemed as if she had not done; it was Ann who waited.

"If we'd wanted proof — which we did n't . . . But it's wonderful. Ann, do you see how wonderful? First what you've done, and then what Johnny's

done for himself. Those girls, and then Piper. If he'd been really the son of the house — which he is . . ."

She blazed suddenly.

"Ann, they'll let him stand for the son of the house. They're ready. They want to. It's for you to complete it. Complete it! It lies with you. Of course, I know you can never really do that — any more than you could really proclaim yourself if you wanted to. There'll always be one thing that can't be done for him now. But he's going to live, and there is something that can be done — that you can do. Ann, Ann — Oh, how shall I put this? — there's a way of happiness yet if you'll only take it. Here's what I mean: whatever it costs you, whatever it costs your pride, one of these days you'll have to give Johnny his father."

CHAPTER X

Not wholly ingenuous? But so very nearly! Johnny would benefit, if it was Ann primarily (and Romance) that Claudia was thinking of — if (though she was not ready quite to admit this) it was, indeed, Coram himself that she was thinking of. Johnny *would* benefit. No boy ought to be denied a father's care — even though his circumstances might be such as to prevent his ever knowing that his father was his father. Besides, Claudia believed in Coram, in spite of the uncanny accuracy of her guesses about him. It was because of her guesses about him that she did believe in him. That, too, was a point — was the point, perhaps. Ann's happiness was with him. Johnny's happiness, every possible reservation made, was with him. Johnny's happiness was with them both. Not disingenuous, therefore, though not wholly ingenuous.

She did not say that she had seen Coram, though, as they talked till six o'clock brought Poulton back to beam over the improvement in Johnny, one might have supposed that there would have been nothing else left to say. Not when a week was past, and Johnny on the highroad to recovery, had she allowed herself to say that she had seen Coram. She might, to the extent that we have witnessed, use Johnny's illness for her own purposes, but she

had no intention of using it in the final resort, no thought, that is, of effecting a reconciliation, a bringing-together of the estranged or the misunderstanding, by any such obvious means as the appeal of the sick bed of a little child. The artist in her showed itself there. She did not forget that, as far as Coram was concerned, there was no little child. Ann's secret, moreover, was safe with her. Her letter having miscarried, her part, with regard to the existence of a child, was done. It was for Ann to enlighten him if she chose, or, if she chose, never to enlighten him at all. For him Johnny was Johnny Smith; and Johnny Smith, like "Tom Jones" (whose Life, all the same—and Adventures—you were hardly supposed in those decorous times to have read!) was a foundling. But she had prepared the way, given Ann something to think about, an idea to turn over in her mind, to get accustomed to as an idea, and that was as far as she could go for the moment.

She wrote to Coram, temporizing; and waited.

She half wished that Coram would come down on his own account; and waited.

Not till she saw that Ann's mind was at peace did she allow herself to speak.

"Ann," she said, "if Mr. Coram came back what would you do?"

They were in the garden. Ann had some snowdrops which she had picked, in her hand.

She looked at Claudia quickly, then at the flowers, and then back at Claudia.

"How do you mean, Claudia? — what I should do."

"Would you see him?"

Ann did not answer. She looked again at the flowers in her hand, rather, now, as if she did not know what they were, or how they came to be there, and then looked again at Claudia.

"Why do you ask me?" she said at last. "How can I say? I don't know."

A snowdrop fell from the bunch. She stooped and picked it up. "Oh," she said, "need we discuss it?"

"Ann, dear, we must."

"Why?"

Claudia told her.

There was a seat near by. Ann moved to it and sat down.

"Brighton!" Ann said, — "Brighton!"

It was as if she seized upon what she could grasp.

Oh, Claudia thought to herself suddenly, if they also could but have been still at Brighton! It would have been so much easier there. She lost herself for a moment or two in thinking how much easier.

Ann could have met him, or kept out of his way. Ann could have been allowed to meet him by accident. If she, Claudia, had done nothing, the chances were that Ann must have met him. It would have been better, perhaps, that she had so met him in the first instance — unprepared, without time to con-

sider what she should do. Then would have come Claudia's part. If only, then, it had been Ann instead of her who had met him! But she, Claudia, had not exactly met him. She had seen him, followed him. Ann, if she had seen him, would certainly not have followed him. It was as likely as not that her impulse would have been to flee Brighton. But there again was where Claudia could have stepped in. That would have been her chance. Oh, why, why were they not at Brighton?

Ann seemed, for the moment or two in which Claudia was thus occupied, to have no questions to ask. None, at least, came from her, and Claudia had expected so many.

"He wants to see you," Claudia said. "Oh, Ann, do help me. I could n't tell you that day because of Johnny. I came straight back to tell you and you had just had the telegram. I could n't tell you in the train. I could n't tell you while Johnny was ill. I came as near to telling you as I dared. I had to wait. I see, now, that that makes it look as if I had been plotting." She gave a little laugh. "But I have n't," she said.

Ann neither assented nor dissented.

"You do believe me, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," Ann said absently.

"She might help me," Claudia thought.

"He wants to see me?" Ann said.

"Practically he asked me if you would see him. I had to help him to that. It was very difficult for

both of us. Neither of us knew how much the other knew, or how much the other might be supposed to know. There was no firm ground anywhere. One thing I can tell you at once. He knows that you 've adopted a child. I made sure of that. And he has n't, of course, a suspicion."

Something of the strained look left Ann's face.

"I had to assume — we both had — that each of us knew that there was an uncertainty as to your seeing him. That did n't commit either of us. So it could n't commit you. You had forbidden him to write. I, on my part, might be supposed to know that there had been, at least, some sort of check in your ordinary relations."

"There was certainly that," Ann said. But she did not speak bitterly.

She laid the snowdrops down beside her on the seat, where, fond as she was of flowers, she forgot them. Claudia found them there, a little bunch of corpses, the next day.

What was she thinking?

Some pigeons were on the lawn. Claudia watched them. She found herself watching two particular birds; one of these followed the other. The following bird was a male, the followed a female. How persistent he was, but equally persistent she! He would follow her with little rapid pink steps. Rook-ety-koo! He would get in front of her, bowing, his chest puffed out. Always she eluded him. When he got in front of her, she would turn aside. Some-

times she would turn right about and walk quickly in the opposite direction, pecking at food on her way to show how unconcerned she was. He always followed her, close, close upon her pink heels, bowing, bowing, rookety-koo-ing. Sometimes they would appear to set to each other, like dancers in a quadrille, but she, at such moments, was making feints in this direction or that, and he, anticipating her, barring her path. Always she got away. Ultimately, as, of course, she knew in her little deep heart, she would not get away. But her own ultimate surrender was what she counted upon. He would not tire. That was why she might try him, tantalize him. She was quite, quite safe. Little warm eggs one of these days in the soft warm nest!

If only human ways were as simple! Ann, in her innocence, had thought that they were. That supposition indirectly — but also very directly indeed — had landed poor Ann where she was.

What *was* Ann thinking?

It would have been difficult for Ann, in the first few moments which followed Claudia's announcement, to have said what she was thinking, or even feeling. She could not have said, indeed, whether she was feeling anything. She had asked no questions because for the time she had no questions to ask. Her mind seemed to have scuttled into some little recess, from which it listened, as from behind doors or curtains or barricades, to Claudia's

explanations. But there, shut away, it, if not she, was thinking. It was her ambushed mind that was thinking, not she. Brighton. He had been there while as yet she had been there. He had seen Claudia. They had talked. Claudia had seen him face to face. Claudia had talked with him. Claudia had seen his face. She, Ann, had seen it once very near to her own. She had seen tears in his eyes. Claudia had not seen tears in his eyes. Perhaps nobody else had. Claudia was telling her that she was not plotting. Ann was not accusing her of plotting. But Claudia had said an extraordinary thing that night . . . She had said that Ann must give Johnny his father . . .

Ann heard herself saying, "He wants to see me?" She said that, but the words even yet did not mean very much. You said words sometimes. She did not know whether she wanted to see him. She had Johnny. Johnny was all that mattered. But Johnny was his, too.

That was n't true. Johnny was hers only.

Claudia was telling her, as if to make her mind easy, that he knew of Johnny, but also that he did not know of him. That did somehow make her mind easier in its hiding-place. Her mind peered, as it were, out of its hiding-place. What was there to shrink from? Was it herself that she was afraid of? Her mind emerged into the open. There, the sense of what Claudia had been saying to her was suddenly clear. Timothy Coram was not the other side of the

world. She had longed to see him. She might see him if she would.

She became conscious of the day; of the garden; of Claudia, the sun on her shining hair.

Now she wanted to ask questions. She wanted to ask so many that she did not know where to begin. She wanted to know how he looked. Whether he had changed. Oh, very much whether he had changed. She wanted to hear that he had not changed, and she wanted to hear that he had changed, also. She did not want him to have changed much. She wanted to hear that he was well and happy. But she also wanted to hear that he was not quite happy.

It was as if Claudia divined.

"I did n't feel as if his wanderings had been entirely a success," Claudia said. "He did n't say so. He did n't say much about them at all. He just gave me the impression of having been homesick. He said he had been. He spoke of his little house. But I felt it before that. I felt it at once."

Bulkley, getting his impression from letters only, had said something of the same sort.

Ann's heart leapt within her. She felt as Elizabeth may have felt when Mary came to her.

"Tell me about him," she said, her eyes shining like Claudia's hair.

"I meddled once," Claudia warned her.

"Oh, tell me," Ann said.

"I still think —"

"Tell me, tell me."

"Well, I still think it's you."

"If I thought so, I should think I was 'blessed among women.'"

Claudia was holding her hands. Her hold on them tightened suddenly.

"I may have to remind you of that," she said.

"Of what?"

"What you've just said. 'Blessed among women.'"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, Ann."

She was smiling. She would not explain.

"I may not have to," she said, "but I may. Time enough then. Listen to the larks. Did you ever hear such a chorus? And I've eaten larks. Isn't that horrible? I never will again. I think he's come back because he could n't stay away. I am meddling, you see."

"I've been thinking of him all the time," Ann said. "I've been thinking of him when I would n't let myself think of him. When I did n't think of him. Oh, I admit it."

"I knew," Claudia said.

Three specks on the blue sky and a very flood of song. Already the haze of green over the trees. Soon, soon the thrust, the bursting of the buds, the great liberation.

"He's been thinking of you," Claudia was saying. "I believe he's been thinking of you ever since.

There's a chain of thoughts of you round the world this minute."

Oh, Ann said again, if she could think that! Claudia thought it.

"I was n't wrong," Claudia was saying, — "even that time when I did the awful mischief — the unspeakable mischief. What I said was true, though he may n't have known it was true. I knew, when I saw him again, that it was true. I" — she paused — "just knew."

"But he went," Ann said. "Why, if it was true, did he go?"

"Ask him."

Ann shook her head.

"Anyway, you 'll see him?"

"How am I to?"

"If he stayed with Mr. Bulkley the natural thing would be that he should come to see you."

"Oh, yes, if he stayed there."

"That 's where he would stay, unless he came here."

Ann felt herself grow white.

"He could n't come here," she said.

"No," Claudia said, still smiling. "I 'm not suggesting it. There are plenty of places he might go to. Cloistron. Lady Mallard would like to see him again, I dare say."

"Why should he go there?"

"Fotheringham. Lord Fotheringham would n't object."

"Why do you say that, Claudia? Why should Lord Fotheringham object?"

But there were things, it seemed, that Claudia would say which she would not explain. She laughed and kissed her.

"There'll be no talk of Cloistron or Fotheringham," she said. "He'll go, of course, to Mr. Bulkley. He'll be staying there — in what he thinks of as his old home — when the moment comes for the question which you will ask him."

"The moment won't come," said Ann. "I shan't ask him."

But Claudia knew better.

"The moment will come, Ann, and you will ask the question. You'll say just as you said just now: 'But you went away. Why did you go?' If he can't tell you, and it is quite conceivable that he may n't be able to, come to me. It's just possible that, then, I may be able to tell you."

CHAPTER XI

CORAM was coming to Lower Redmayne.

Bulkley told Ann, but Ann knew before that, for Claudia, who had written to Coram, had heard from him.

"To-morrow," Bulkley said — as if the word were not already ringing in Ann's ears! "Mrs. Somers is doing out the room now — his old room. If I had n't been first in saying that he was to have it, I think she would have demanded it."

Ann thought of Mrs. Somers preparing the room for him; airing his sheets (they would smell of lavender); making his bed. It was just like Mr. Bulkley to turn out of his own room for him. She hoped Mrs. Somers would not move too many of his things. She pictured her moving things, emptying drawers — emptying more drawers than could be needed. She thought of Coram protesting. He would protest. And Bulkley would laugh! And Mrs. Somers would bridle. They would all laugh. For there was no excuse. There were plenty of other rooms. Coram would say, "It's too bad!" Bulkley would say, "Nonsense, man, why should n't I?" Coram would persist ("Upon my word, it's too bad!") — would be a little bit distressed even. But it was just like Mr. Bulkley. How much she liked him! She had at once a sort of feeling that she had neglected

him. Why had she never accorded him his predecessor's weekly half-hour? The weekly half-hour had been entirely unnecessary? The weekly half-hour had been accorded to the man, not the agent? All went smoothly without it. It seemed to have been accorded to the man. More light for her upon the deep places in her soul! It had been accorded to the man!

Shame upon her! Was she only now beginning to know herself? And here was Mr. Bulkley turning out of his room that he might give of his best to his friend.

Vague tendernesses stirred in her.

"When do you think of marrying?" she said to him.

Now, what on earth made her say that? She managed not to blush for an impulsiveness which was really — really and truly, as she said to herself — not a bit like her. She managed to look at him with steady, rather quizzical eyes. So she retrieved her blunder. A young aunt, who might have said just what she said to a nephew of about her own age, might have looked at him just as she was looking.

"How did you know?" he said.

He was very pleasant to look at as she saw him freshly. He was small-headed, reddish. He was not a bit good-looking, but his face crinkled up delightfully when he smiled.

"I did n't know," said Ann. "You 'll have to for-

give me. I was thinking of all the nice girls there are."

"She lives at Winchester," said Bulkley, nodding. "Her father is one of the minor Canons. He has n't quite given his consent."

"The usual parents' reasons?"

Bulkley laughed.

"The worldly wisdom of a very good churchman. He married himself, I may say, on what he won't hear of our marrying on."

"That's why," said Ann.

"He may come round. He allowed a sort of unofficial engagement when I got my unexpected promotion to Coram's post. I'm not worrying. She is what matters, and there I'm safe. The nicest of all the nice girls, Mrs. Forrester."

"I'm sure of that," Ann said, "and, may I add, one of the luckiest?"

"No," said Bulkley; "it's I who am lucky."

"Two lucky people, then," said Ann. "He — the Canon — has named some sort of an income?"

"Oh, he *says* —"

"Are you very far short of what he says?"

"Between us, not so very. We both, happily, have something of our own. Another year or so, if I'm fortunate enough to go on giving satisfaction here, will see us within — well, measurable distance of touching it."

"You could take a pupil."

"Would you let me?"

"Mr. Coram had one."

"Ah, he had been here for years."

"You're going to be here for years, I hope, Mr. Bulkley."

"May I think that?"

"I want you to."

She would not hear of thanks. The thanks were, she said, the other way.

"What should I have done without you when Mr. Coram left me?"

"He would n't have left you," Bulkley said.

Ann seemed to herself to be back with something there. She did not, whatever it was, follow it up. She was content with the day's contentment.

"To-morrow," she was saying to herself. "To-morrow. To-morrow."

"Look out for a pupil," she said aloud. "You would get one easily. And, somehow, we must contrive to soften or satisfy your Canon. I don't like engagements to be too long."

Bulkley went home feeling that he would die for her.

"To-morrow. To-morrow," thought Ann. He was arriving in the morning, and she took that to mean that she should see him in the afternoon. In the ordinary course he would surely have come by the train by which she and Claudia had travelled. That would have been the 'natural' train to take — a train which left Brighton at three o'clock, rather than a train which started at nine, and to catch

which he would have to rise early and swallow his breakfast in haste. He was coming to her hot-foot. The intimation could mean nothing less — the mention of trains at all.

She would be ready for him. She would be waiting . . .

She spent the rest of the morning with Johnny. He was out again now, and Claudia and she, Poulton within hail, pushed his perambulator about in the sunshine. He crowed and he wriggled and he laughed. He held out his hands for things, or leaned, bodily, across his strap towards what or whom he wanted. He made sounds that were nearly words; that might at any moment now become words, or give place to words.

Claudia said, "Ann, he's adorable."

Any one would have wished to adopt him. Ann knew what she meant. It was true, too. She might show him now to his father, if she would. She might, without fear or misgiving, though he was not five years old — the adoptable age! — show him to any one, unchallenged, unquestioned. Would the day come when she would really show him to his father? She believed that that day would come, and that it was even at hand. She set herself resolutely, as she had borne her unhappiness, to bear her happiness.

"This time last year!" she said to Claudia.

"We won't think of this time last year," Claudia said quickly.

"But somehow I can now," Ann said. "He will be a year old on Sunday. His first birthday."

They drove in to Windlestone that afternoon. Ann (since the morning) had business to do at Pargiter and Fosberry's. While she was in there, Claudia bought a woolly ball for Johnny, at Miss Blondin's. It was a disappointment that Miss Blondin, to whom, if she had seen her, she would have deemed it not less than expedient to give the news of Mr. Coram's return, chanced to be out. Miss Blondin would have been excited over the news. Not only back in England, but expected at Lower Redmayne! There would, indeed, have been news for Miss Blondin and Miss Blondin's customers. Claudia, buying the woolly ball for Johnny's birthday, could picture Miss Blondin's glowings. Whipple and Piper that morning had glowed in their separate, restrained ways. Ann, in her way, in spite of all she had suffered was glowing.

Ann was glowing when she came out of Pargiter and Fosberry's. Mr. Pargiter, bareheaded, accompanied her to the carriage door. He bowed to Claudia — who would have hugged herself with delight if she could have known why his bows to her were so stiff! She, in her innocence, supposed all his bows to be stiff, like himself.

"You'll be amused at what I've been doing," Ann said, when, after a visit to the toy shop in view of Johnny's approaching birthday, they were on

their way home. "At least, you'll be amused at my reasons. I've been arranging that Mr. Bulkley shall have a rise a year sooner than he expects it."

"And now for the Why?" said Claudia.

Ann, of course, said nothing of Mr. Bulkley's confidence to her.

"Out of his very bed," she said. "Think of it! That Mr. Coram might have his old room. And I know Mrs. Somers will move everything. I declare, Claudia, it touched me to the heart."

Nothing could have pleased Claudia more than such evidences. Sentiment. It was the one thing needful. Everything promised. Everything was right. Ann's face was set towards the morrow, and Claudia's no less. She felt for Ann's hand in the carriage and held it. Now, if only Coram could make out a case for himself. No. Not that. If Ann could be satisfied with the truth, if she could hear the truth, accept it. Once she did accept it, all would be well. But could she? Would she? A shattering of illusions for such as Ann, a pulling-down of much that stood firm. A pulling-down of men, a pulling-down of women — Ann herself amongst them. Could she stand that? And keep her faiths? And see (as a worldlier Claudia saw — a Claudia with open eyes) that a new faith must rise like a Phœnix out of the ashes of the old, and that the new faith would be what mattered? Ann just did not know.

"Oh, Ann," Claudia said to herself, "don't ask

too much. Men are n't saints. Many, many women are n't saints either. You realize the man's appeal, but you don't in the very least understand what it means. That is why what happened to you did happen to you. You've only to look at this man to know how life must have presented itself to him. But you have looked at him without knowing. Try, try, try to understand."

With all the auguries propitious, with happiness in the air, with Johnny well and Ann glowing, Claudia had moments when she was frightened.

"Try," she said again to herself, but apostrophizing Ann. "Try to understand. Oh, be willing to understand."

Aloud she said, "I've always liked Mr. Bulkley. I always thought you did n't half see enough of him."

"I mean to see ever so much more of him in future."

The night came. Ann, as once before, hardly expecting to sleep, slept. She awoke in the morning to another beautiful day. Sunlight edged its way into her bedroom as the housemaid drew the curtains — to pour in in full flood as the blinds behind them were drawn up. Through the open window, which she told her not to close, came the songs of birds. They had begun their songs early in that year of special grace. Soon now they would be in full song. Soon now the cuckoo would be heard again. The wood-

land would be green and he would come back, and he would call, here from a copse, there from a copse, you could never say exactly where, but the spring would throb to his note and she would be able to listen. Oh, she would be able to listen this year. Love-songs, this year, love-songs. She would be able to bear them.

Her room was singing. The silver and the glass on her toilet table were singing in the sun. The stopper of a cut-glass bottle was a monstrous flashing diamond singing to the new day. Some anemones, red and purple and white in a shining bowl, were a chorus of praise jubilant as the song of larks. Zélie appeared now with her morning tea, and Ann watched her as she bustled silently about, a trim, sturdy figure. She, too, had an air of singing.

"A morning of the South, eh, Zélie?"

Zélie was Provençale.

"Truly, Madame, a morning of the South. One would say the summer already."

There was a sky, Zélie said. Blue — but blue! A sky of a blueness! She meant, perhaps, that such skies were rare in England. They were not, Ann thought, smiling contentedly; but if they were, this one was appropriately sent.

"Yes, blue," Ann said, looking at it from her bed.

"The blue of the robe of Our Lady," Zélie said. "And what will Madame wear?"

Ann drank her tea and sent for Johnny. Zélie brought him to her, herself. She came in laughing,

her head on one side, Johnny, gurgling with mischief, tugging one earring.

"Ah, ah, ah, polisson! Ss'v! Pauv'e Zélie! On va lui arracher l'oreille! Oh, le petit polisson! Voilà, Madame."

Twenty minutes Ann asked for.

Mother and son. Twenty happy minutes. It was her ears now that Johnny was pulling — having learnt a new and delightful game. He could hurt, too, he was so strong. Or he closed his little fists about the two long thick plaits of her hair — and pulled till the 'Ah's' and the indrawn 'Ss'v's' came from her. Or he stood up tottering and threw himself down upon her. She kissed his neck, burying her face in his shoulder.

One of these days! One of these days . . .

She whispered into the warm hollow where her face was hidden: —

"Would you like a father, Johnny, — a father of your own? Not quite as other little boys have fathers. But a father who would love you more, perhaps, than other little boys' fathers, and who would make up to you for what it is not in your mother's power, or his, ever to give you. Would you?"

Johnny did n't know. He wriggled himself free to stagger once more to his laughing feet and throw himself down.

"Oh, Johnny, it shall be made up to you. It shall. It shall."

Twenty happy minutes.

The dining-room was full of sunshine, Claudia, quite out of mourning now (and ready, when Ann's affair should be settled, for any really desirable attack upon her widowhood), wore a blue dress. Blue was in the air, Ann said to herself, as she kissed her. But she had no fear of bolts; Claudia, as she saw Ann's radiance, none either. All was going to be well upon this day of days.

The servants trooped in to prayers.

Ann read part of the hundred and seventh Psalm.

"*O that men would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness; and declare the wonders that he doeth for the children of men!*"

For the sake of the thirtieth verse she had chosen it, but it was with this, the thirty-first verse, that she ended. She was very happy.

"*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;*

"*As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*"

And so through the prayers themselves, praise sounding and resounding, to the final *Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ . . .*

It was then that, in her happiness and her thankfulness and her confidence also, she remembered the words of comfort and encouragement which had been spoken once to just such a sinner as, at the bottom of her heart, she believed herself to have been. The words had been spoken by One who had boundless understanding. He cast no stones. A new thought

came to her. A wider light shone upon his understanding. It was not so much (thus she phrased the thought as if she were arguing) — not so much that He had said, 'Neither do I condemn thee,' as that He had taken it for granted that, of those present, not one was in a position to cast a stone . . .

He expected nothing but humanness of human nature! Human nature unredeemed, of course, unregenerate, but human nature.

Ann rose from her knees, puzzling, puzzled.

Claudia, if she could have known, might have asked herself whether that thought, that argument, though she had not had the good fortune to think of it, was not hers by at least every other right! If she had thought of it — and if she had to argue — we may be sure that she would have used it. It would have been treasure trove to her. It summed up all her arguments.

CHAPTER XII

LOWER REDMAYNE was swept and garnished. Mrs. Somers, who had swept and garnished it, was in and out of the room she thought of as the Master's all the morning. The Master was, of course, Mr. Coram. Mr. Bulkley, though she liked him and served him very faithfully, had never been more than the Young Master. Thus, she made her distinctions which were her reservations. It is to be feared that, from the bedroom which she was preparing, she had moved quite as much as Ann, with half-comic dismay, had anticipated. To leave an empty wardrobe and empty chests of drawers for the Master, she had moved, indeed, nearly everything — justifying such thoroughness to herself with the plea that the Young Master in his new quarters would in turn need *his* things about *him*. Bulkley on his part, amused inwardly, had made no protest. Mrs. Somers liked doing it. And it would be Mrs. Somers who would move everything back.

The fire was laid ready to light in the evening. The boards shone with beeswax and turpentine; the old furniture shone; the brasses. The vases of daffodils were the final touch. This added, Mrs. Somers surveyed the scene of her labours, and the result of her labours, with satisfaction and pride. Her labours were labours of love.

She heard the dog-cart come round from the stable to barkings and bayings and to one sustained whining, and presently drive away. Mr. Bulkley had gone to meet Mr. Coram. The one whine died down to silence.

Coram, stepping out of the train to Bulkley's hearty greeting, must have felt as if he were coming home indeed. Bulkley's announcement to the station-master had collected a little eager crowd of persons upon the platform: a farmer or two; Mr. Trinden the Vet. come to fetch a dog which had arrived by an earlier train; this one and that; at the outskirts, loiterers, hovering porters.

Welcome was written on every face.

"Jove!" Coram said, shaking Bulkley's hand, "it's good to be back."

"It's good to see you back," said Bulkley.

"Aye, it is that, sir," said the station-master.

Hands all round, smilings, greetings. Coram, as they drove through the familiar streets, stopping every few yards as he was recognized and hailed, may have asked himself why he had ever gone away!

There was Miss Blondin!

"If it is n't Mr. Coram!"

Miss Blondin, of the Berlin Wool Shop, unchanged and unchanging, was bobbing and bridling, her long black earrings a-swing. She looked from Coram to Bulkley, from Bulkley to Coram.

"Well, this is a delightful surprise! Mr. Coram!

Well! Back from his travels. Back from the Grand Tour. Looking so well, too, — though a thought thinner. But for a long stay, I hope, Mr. Coram."

"For as long as we can hold him," Bulkley laughed.

"Ah, there'll be willing hands to help you to do that, Mr. Bulkley. Soft hands, too. White hands. Glad hearts in the county this day, Mr. Coram! Well, well, well, this is a delightful surprise."

Then it was the town clerk and then Dr. Harborough. A quarter of an hour before they were out of the town.

He looked about him. Wombwell's Menagerie, by the hoardings, had visited the neighbourhood again lately, and Ginnett's Circus. He felt probably as if he had n't been away at all, and as if he had been away for centuries. Inwardly, maybe, he was nervous. He had been away for centuries and his heart, if we are to believe Claudia, had not stirred from Redmayne. Just as Claudia had said "England!" on a like occasion, so, as he was driven by Bulkley along the greening roads, he said, "England!"

There was nothing to touch it, he meant.

"Not a bad little island," said Bulkley.

"The country to live in," said Coram.

Claudia would have noticed that he had not yet spoken Ann's name. But she would have seen that he hovered round it, as the porters had hovered about the little knot of persons on the platform at the station. He seemed likely to get no nearer to it

than Redmayne in the eager questions he began to ask now. He wanted to know everything about Redmayne — the same Everything upon which, in his talk with Claudia at Brighton, Claudia had closed.

Bulkley spoke it.

"I saw Mrs. Forrester yesterday. She knows you 're arriving this morning."

"I think I'll call on her this afternoon," Coram was able to say then.

"How is she?" he asked the next moment.

His question appeared to fix Bulkley's attention upon something which he had seen without, as it were, observing. She looked splendid, he said, splendid. There was a 'Now I come to think of it' in the manner in which he added, "I've never seen her look better."

It was because she had been so anxious about Johnny, Bulkley was thinking, and now Johnny was well. She had looked splendid, radiant.

But Coram, catching, perhaps, at straws, would interpret in his own way. She could not be hostile and look radiant. Some such interpretation, no doubt.

"She is the kindest person," Bulkley said. He was thinking now of their talk, and of the interest which she had shown in his affairs. He, like Coram, had his thoughts. She *had* shown interest! She wanted genuinely to see him able to marry his Stella. He had not yet received Mr. Pargiter's letter which was to tell him of the practical form her interest had taken,

and had taken at once. But her sincerity needed no such proofs. He thought again of her face as he had seen it the morning before, and of its notable radiance.

"It was a lucky day for me when I came to Redmayne as your pupil," he said.

"Mrs. Forrester probably thinks it was a lucky day for her," Coram said very heartily.

For a few moments, each thinking his own thoughts, the two fell into silence. The faint mist of green was plainly visible over the trees and hedges now. In a week or two, if there were no set-back, the buds would open almost as you watched. Claudia would have seen that Coram devoured the country with his eyes. Every landmark, every yard of the road, almost, must have had its memories for him.

"By Jove, Juniper!" he said suddenly.

It was his old mare.

"And Juno's in the stable."

They talked horses for the next quarter of a mile, and then dogs. It was no slight to the faithful Somers that by the way of the names of these faithful friends they reached hers.

"She's with you still?"

"She rules me."

"Dear old thing! She used to rule me."

He laughed, but Claudia would have known now that he was nervous. Easy enough to understand that. There was always what had happened, and always the one letter which he had received from Ann

— the letter which had closed a chapter, as it must have seemed, finally. Ann had told him not to write again. It had been then, perhaps, that, having lost her, he had begun to love her?

Or had he, indeed, loved her always? There had never been a time, perhaps, when he had not loved her.

They turned, presently, into the lane. As they drew near the end of their drive, his nervousness, though he was still able to conceal it from Bulkley, would have been increasingly patent to Claudia. He was in Redmayne and he was going to see Ann in a few short hours. The day had come to which he had looked from what Claudia always thought of as the other side of the world. He had wondered whether this day would ever come. Time, with Ann's one letter, must have shown him his offence, and the enormity of his offence, since it was an offence. He thought himself dismissed, and Ann had allowed him to come back. Perhaps he did not think of what he should say to her. That, like Claudia's attitude at Brighton, could be decided by perceptions, intuitions even, when the moment came. If he did not understand, — and we, with Claudia, may suppose that he did not, — he would trust to understand when he should see Ann face to face. But he was nervous. Yes, he was horribly nervous.

At the bend in the lane a distant glimpse of the house was to be caught. Claudia would have seen

that he bent forward as they approached the spot, and then, when they had passed it, that he leant back, his muscles relaxing.

A few minutes later they were at Lower Redmayne, and, to the tune of a wild barking of imprisoned dogs, he was shaking the hand of Mrs. Somers — and being told that he did not look as well as when he went away!

"Thinner, sir, that's what you are, though sunburnt, I grant you. Living on curries, I suppose, and a stranger to good English beef. We'll soon fatten you up again. Won't we, Mr. Bulkley, sir? I never did hold with foreign foods. Tinned, too, I dare say. I know their heathenish messes. Don't tell me!"

"There is n't much I could tell you about cookery, is there, Mrs. Somers?"

"Ah, well, plain and 'olesome, that's my motto. But, then, I'm old-fashioned."

The dogs barked and whined — one more than the rest.

"That's Fanny, sir, yowlin'." Tom spoke, the smiling stable man, who had smiled and smiled since his old master had wrung his hand. "I've had fine work with her this mornin'. She wanted to go with the dog-cart. I believe she knew you was expected, sir. She 's waitin' for you, any'ow. More like a yuman bein', that dog, than a yanimal."

Coram strode to the stable to greet his old spaniel, alone.

Eight hours later he was again in a train. A telegram — the semblance of a telegram — had called him back to Brighton. Brighton or London or Jericho . . . Heaven knew where he was going, but with a yellow envelope in his hand he had said Brighton. Mrs. Somers, her labours of love, love's labour lost, had swept and garnished for nothing; turned out, emptied, moved. The sweet-smelling sheets had not been rumpled, the very fire (the provoking day too warm even towards nightfall for fires in bedrooms) had not been lighted. Love's labour wasted truly! Mrs. Somers, like Fanny the spaniel, lifted up her voice in lamentation. The bitterness of her lamentations she turned first against telegrams (Telegrams! She had always hated them. It was a telegram in the first instance which had called the Master away at all — struck the hour of his departure anyhow!) — and then against an innocent old lady at Brighton. Inconsiderateness was what Mrs. Somers never could stand. Mr. Coram's aunt—if she was ill—should have put off her illness.

"I shan't move a thing," she said, "till we see if she does or she does n't get better. If she does I suppose she'll have the grace, maybe, to let him come back."

Bulkley, puzzled himself, forced to smile in spite of his own disappointment, could not say whether Mr. Coram's return was to be looked for; but added quietly (smiling inwardly this time), "You'll do, of course, as I tell you, Mrs. Somers."

"Of course, sir! You'll know that I meant no disrespect. Your pardon, I'm sure, sir, — *and* the old lady's at Brighton, — for I suppose I forgot myself. But, please, please, just for a day or two, you won't tell me."

They left it at that.

And what had happened? Claudia would have known what had happened; if Bulkley, his puzzled host, was as much in the dark as the lamenting Somers.

CHAPTER XIII

THE interview between Coram and Ann took place in the library. Ann had given directions to Whipple that, as of old, Mr. Coram when he called should be shown in there. She felt that failing the one place of all where — if there be such a thing as the psychological spot in the sense in which, in the jargon of these days, we speak of the psychological moment — the meeting should have taken place, the library would afford her, and perhaps him also, the most support in circumstances in which they might both be expected to need all the support which the influences of familiar and friendly things had the power to give. She wanted, moreover, to see him in the old surroundings. He was associated in her mind with the library more intimately than with any other room in the house. But it was not that only which guided her. It was also that it was here that they had been wont to meet in the unmenaced comradeship of those weekly half-hours of shared labours, before the knowledge that she loved him changed everything for her, and charged their meetings with the desperate pleasure that is nearly all pain.

Whipple, with the afterglow of greetings and welcomings in his face, came to tell her that Mr. Coram was there. Ann wondered how many times to the

same announcement she had replied that she would be with Mr. Coram in a minute.

She experienced now, waiting as she was, — a woman for her lover, — ready as she was, prepared, eager, a very panic of fear and reluctance. If she could have put her thoughts into words, they must have expressed themselves in some such cry as the supreme cry of all the anguished cries: Let this pass from me! Her head swam. Drops came out upon her forehead. Claudia! Claudia! But Claudia was not there. Claudia had gone out with the deliberate intention of not being there. She felt alone, deserted. She had never known such a moment of loneliness and isolation. She sank to her knees and she prayed.

Then, as the terror had come to her, so did the terror pass. It was her lover who was waiting for her. A lover who had come across the world to tell her that he loved her. And her lover was her heart's desire and she loved him. What was there to fear? Did she fear of very happiness? She had said, "To-morrow! To-morrow!" And to-morrow was to-day. Her face had been set towards an hour, as the face of the sunflower towards the sun, and that hour was here.

For a moment, as she entered the library, she thought it was empty. But Coram, whom she had looked to see in his old seat by the writing-table, or standing, as he so often used to stand, under the

Romney, and, whether there was a fire or not, with his back to the hearth, had walked (in what was probably restlessness under stress upon his part also of feeling) to the farthest of the three windows. From out of the embrasure he came forward to meet her.

They shook hands.

They stood for a moment or two facing each other without speaking. Ann's calmness, when she had real need of it, never failed her, but after the violence of her recent emotion she found herself surprised at the calmness from out of the shelter of which she was able to observe that he was not calm. The hand which had taken her own steady hand was trembling. At that, though she did not tremble outwardly, she trembled inwardly with gladness. Presently she would be telling him, and she could hardly face the gladness that would be hers when she should have told him.

They were still standing. She remembered a conversation which had taken place in this room, throughout the greater part of which they had remained standing.

"Oh, let us sit down," she said. It was the first sign that she gave him that she, perhaps, was not calmer than he. She knew suddenly that if she was to remain calm she must sit down. She could trust her face, but not her knees. The chair in which she used always to sit for the weekly half-hours was in its old place beside the writing-table. She sat down

on it, hoping that she did not appear to him to sink into it. It gave her strength. It was solid as a rock. It was one of the many valuable things in the beautiful room; made in days when furniture was made for lasting. It gave her of its own strength.

"It's so wonderful to be back," he was saying, speaking thickly and with difficulty, "and to be here."

He did not at once sit down himself, though his old chair was there, too, at the writing-table. That had always been her arrangement: that he who had most of the writing to do should sit at the table, she beside it.

He looked round the room, finding nothing changed, paced a few yards of the floor, looked at her again, and again looked round the room. He might never have been away at all. He came to a standstill beside his chair — the chair that she thought of as his. Not two years yet — but a lifetime!

"I have n't dared to let myself think that you would see me."

Ann pondered that. Still, he had not sat down. She wished that he would sit down. And yet, deeper in her heart, she did not see how things that he must say, or must have to say, could be said or be taken — or be taken! — sitting.

"Time makes things possible," Ann said. "Till lately — it's better that I should say it — I don't think I could have seen you. That does n't mean that

I might not have wished to see you. It means just what it says. I might have been wishing to see you, but I should n't have seen you."

She spoke very gently if she spoke very carefully, weighing her words. She had, at least, broken the ice for him.

"I could n't have looked for anything else," he said, "if you had n't."

That finished that. It was for him to plunge now and he did not plunge. What he did was to draw the chair round — it swung on a pivot — and at last to sit down.

He was not quite facing her and she was able to look at him. She saw the fine network of lines that Claudia had seen about his eyes, and she saw, like Claudia, that these lines yet, somehow, did not age him. He had still his air of being a boy — a very big boy. If her heart had been hard, which it was not, that must have softened it. Her heart seemed to swell within her as she looked at him. An extraordinary tenderness rose in her like the gushing waters of a fountain. She wanted at that moment to possess him rather than to be possessed by him. If he had looked at her in that moment, they must have rushed to an understanding of each other. But he did not look at her in that moment, and afterwards of her pride Ann could tell herself that she was glad. Even as the moment passed she knew that there must be no jumping to issues. Everything depended, and must depend, upon what he had to say.

He began to speak. He spoke of Claudia and of their meeting at Brighton.

"Yes," Ann said, "Claudia told me. It was strange that we should have been there."

"If it had been you I met instead of Mrs. Nanson, would you have spoken to me?"

He turned to face her now, the chair moving round a little on its pivot.

"Yes," Ann said, "I think I should have spoken to you then. That's not very long ago, and time, as I said just now, makes things possible that would n't always have been possible. I should have spoken to you — listened to you, anyway."

It was as if he said, 'That's something.'

She saw a movement that wrung her heart — a movement which passed all over him, his face, his body. He was pressing his hands one against the other, with a force that was convulsive and probably quite unconscious.

"I don't know how to speak," he said. "I don't know how to begin. It is n't that I don't know what I want to say. I've had what I want to say in my mind for so long that if I did n't speak" — he looked round — "I feel as if the very stones would cry out. Oh, it is n't quite that either. I want — I want —"

He could not go on.

"Tell me," Ann said.

He put the hands that he had been pressing together over his eyes.

That also gave Ann that tender, unnerving pain which the tremor she had seen pass over him, and through him, from his head to his feet, had occasioned her.

"Tell me," she said again, almost inaudibly.

She could still trust herself, but she would not be able to trust herself for long if his involuntary actions continued to play upon the chords of her very being. At all costs she must not let herself go till she had heard what he had to say. She was sure — was n't she, oh, was n't she? — that the moment was coming when she might cast all to the winds and let herself go where she would be carried. But first she must hear what he had to say, and what he had to say must, yes, must, tell her what, and what only, she could consent to hear.

"Don't worry yourself," she said now, still in a low voice, "about how you say it. Say what you want to say in the first words that come to you."

So much encouragement, at least, she might give him. It was dreadful to her that in some sort she should seem to be judging him. But it had to be so. She had, as it were, to suffer it to be so now.

"Well, I don't know how I'm to expect you to understand," he said. "I don't, myself, in a way, though I've had time for thinking. I've been alone with — with what I have had to think of for nearly two years. I've been absolutely alone with it since I got your letter. Thinking, thinking. It won't bear thinking of, but I've done nothing else.

Oh," he said, "if I could tell you you would n't know."

She could not help him, as Claudia had once helped him.

"I — how shall I put this? — I — one must speak of what won't bear thinking of. If I could have asked you to forgive me for that, I think I could have borne it, but you told me not to write again, and I did n't. I could n't in the face of what you said. But it pretty well broke me."

It 'broke' Ann to hear that. She was so ready to hear anything that should give her the assurance she wanted. She looked again at him as again he put his hands over his eyes. Goodness! as Claudia would have said, was n't it enough? The sight of this man suffering for her, the knowledge that he had suffered for her in all the time that she had been suffering for him? We may condone Claudia's less exacting attitude, surely. We know that Claudia, looking at him with Ann, would have said that if it was n't enough it ought to have been. It would have been in the case of nine women out of ten. But Ann, for her misfortunes, was the tenth woman. It was n't enough. It was n't enough yet, anyway. It was n't enough, that is to say, at the point which Ann had then reached. Ann, in sympathy, might be 'broken,' but something which was still rigid had to be broken in Ann before it could be enough.

He did not look at her as he began to speak again.

"Afterwards," — he sank his voice so that she in

turn hardly heard him, — "when I knew that — that I loved you, and what — what that meant to me, I would have given my life to wipe out what I had done. I did n't know till then what the 'repentance' that the Bible is full of means. I did n't know till then that there could be a changing of one's whole outlook. 'Conversion' is the horrible word for the sort of thing that I mean. There are these things. They are not only a state of religious emotion which one associates with revivalist meetings. They are real changes of attitude. From such moments one sees everything newly. I *would* have given my life. I wanted only one thing in the world from that moment, and your letter told me that the one thing that I wanted I had put it out of my power ever to get. You meant what you said? You meant then you did n't want to hear anything I could say? You meant — anything more to do with me?"

"Yes, I meant that," Ann said.

As he spoke her heart had been sinking. Was that what he had to tell her? If that was what he had to tell her, if she had not meant then what she had written, she would have had to mean it, and she would have meant it, now. She heard him in a sort of uneasy, distressing dream, wishing to stop him, unable to stop him. His words fell upon her ears as if from and across an immeasurable distance. Had she known him at all — ever known him? He had not loved her till afterwards. His love had not awakened his passion. His passion had awakened his love. What

was he telling her, if not this? Oh, other things he was telling her. That he had been faithful to her since? His faithfulness to her since did not seem to her to matter very greatly if he had not been faithful to her before — if there had been nothing to be faithful to. The world was toppling about her, shaken, it seemed, to its very foundations.

She had a sensation of physical cold as if the temperature of the room had fallen. The fire which, in the ordinary course, had been lighted that morning, before the unexpected warmth of the day had declared itself, had been allowed to go out. Ann, looking past Coram at the ashes in the grate, thought, behind the tumult of her thoughts, that nothing looked more desolate than a dead fire. It was colder than a fire which has never been lighted. It was also like something which has given up its soul. She shivered in the warm room.

And then from the hall, down the length of the passage and through the closely fitting door, she heard the faint echoes of a familiar sound: Johnny and his nurses starting for their walk. Her hands lying along the arms of her chair gripped the polished grooved wood. She knew in that moment that she would not, as she had so fondly supposed, presently be telling him. She was not going to tell him. He had made it impossible that he could be told.

His next words set the seal, if any had been needed, upon the impossibility.

"I had done for myself, too, by a horrible mistake."

She may have winced then. Did he see? Did he know that he was done for? He hurried on: "Call it madness. It's out of the question that I can explain. It *was* madness. I must have gone clean out of my senses. I ask you to believe that."

Ann heard him. He had said 'mistake,' and asked her to believe almost the one thing of all that she did not wish to believe. The only more dismaying utterance that she could have heard from his lips would have been that he had behaved like a cad. She knew in her heart that such a self-accusation would not have presented the case. She knew that it would have misrepresented it to grotesqueness. She knew that, even as things were, he was, in his unhappiness, misinterpreting it, and in spite of himself distorting it; but she could not balance her convictions against the words he had spoken. If he thought he had behaved badly — even badly! — he had behaved badly; and that was the end of everything.

He did not say what she dreaded. She was spared that. She had nodded too briefly, perhaps, to his petition. Her acquiescence — if it was acquiescence — closed what he may have thought of as the intolerably painful part of those things which had to be spoken between them.

Much had to be spoken between them, but, for one of them, everything had been spoken when the other had used those words 'mistake' and 'madness.' Nay, before he had used them. All was over for her

when he had used the word 'Afterwards.' Ann was relieved that no sounds came through the windows from the garden. Johnny and his perambulator and his nurses had gone another way.

Yet she heard all that he had to say. Thus she learnt that but for her letter he had meant to abandon his projected travels and come back in the first available boat. This gave her her one gleam of consolation, for it seemed to antedate the 'Afterwards' which she had placed at the exact moment of the receipt of her letter. But he had not come back, and his 'Afterwards' stuck, as it were, in her throat, choking the words which might even then have brought their tried souls to some sort of a mutual understanding. If he had not loved her at the supreme moment of her life, what did it matter when it was, precisely, that he had come to love her? She respected his obedience to her wishes. She had left him no loophole. She had meant her letter to be the final word from which there can be no appeal. She remembered only too well the desolation of heart and soul and spirit out of which it had been written. Her pride had received what must have been its death-wound if she had spared herself the knife. Even if she had known then what was to happen to her, it is doubtful whether she would have flinched. She could be glad at heart that when she wrote she had not known.

And something else was between them. She saw

that he supposed his difficulties to be complicated by their relative worldly positions and even possessions. Claudia had known that they were thus complicated. As if these mattered! As if, whatever he could be accused of, he could be so much as suspected of fortune-hunting! He, upon his part, knew, of course, that she would not so suspect him, but the mere fact that there was this difference did, she perceived, hamper him. Well, was it not the supposed importance of this difference which she herself had once believed to be hampering him, tying his tongue, driving him, in fine, from Redmayne?

Was it not the conviction that this, in very truth, was so which had sent her trembling, fainting, to the shadowed garden?

Difficulties for him; difficulties for her; difficulties everywhere. Was it to have been expected that anything would go smoothly?

But she had said, "Tell me," and "Tell me," while as yet she had thought that what he had to tell her was what she hungered to hear. She had told him not to trouble himself about the manner of his telling, but to speak in the first words that should come to him. And she had consented to see him. And he was there. And the sum of these things — though by then he, too, must have perceived that all was going hopelessly awry — brought him to the final which was also the primal object of his visit. She saw the effort that he made to get control of his muscles and his voice. He had turned

round in his chair and was facing her. It was her eyes that were looking down now, and she felt the steadfast gaze of his through her eyelids.

"You meant that, then," he was saying; "I could n't have looked for anything else. I don't pretend that I deserved anything else. But now? You said time made things possible. If it means anything to you to know it, I don't think there has been an hour of all the time I've been away that I have n't been thinking of you. I've thought of you so constantly that I don't know what I have really thought and what I have only desperately wanted to think. I know that I've sometimes dared to think that you might care. I've nothing to go upon — or only such little things that they amount to nothing. Movings of straws — hardly that. But if you knew how I wanted to think that they had any meaning, you'd understand my grasping even at straws."

"One moment," Ann said: "When was this?"

"When? All the time."

" I see," Ann said. " You were looking back."

"I was looking back for anything that could give me a glimmering of hope. I was raking the days and the years for any sort of confirmation. Oh, there was little enough. I don't mean your goodness to me. There were a dozen steady years of that. I mean anything that might seem to show that you could care for me, or think of me as more than a friend. Two — occasions," — he paused for the

word, — "do stand out from the rest: the day we stood by the statue in the wood is one of them, and that last evening here is the other. Do you remember the statue?"

Did she not? Nothing that he could have instanced could have come so near to disarming her. Happen what might, some sort of solace would be left to her out of the bitterness of her disillusion and disappointment. He had felt the spell. They had been near to each other that day. Then, at least, they had been near to each other. She saw him again with the bird in his arms. She felt again the unbearable pain of that moment. She saw the bird released, wait, and then fly. She saw herself sitting on the stone seat, and Coram on the ground at her feet. She heard again the soft whinnying of his horse. She saw him next standing beside her in the middle of the circle before the figure it enshrined. And then she saw something else. She saw him, just before they turned to go, pick a leaf and lay it as an offering at the feet of the waiting boy.

If she remembered!

"Then," he said, "that last evening — not — not only the end of it . . . the whole of it: dinner . . . the three of us, you and I and Mrs. Nanson . . . something over us, and over us when we sat in the garden, and most of all when we said good-bye. There seemed to be something that was n't said then, and that somehow could n't be said . . ."

But that way lay also the madness he had spoken of, and the mistake! Useless anything that he could say. What Ann saw, to the obscuring of everything else, was that marriage, or even the thought of marriage, had not been in his mind at the time of a surrender which she, God help her, had looked upon as her share in a sacrament. The chalice a stirrup cup in very truth — nothing more, nothing less. He, in other words, had seen Profane Love where she had seen Sacred Love. That sufficed for her. She asked no questions. She refused him, aware to misery that in so doing she dismissed him.

So, for the second time, he left her.

THE FOURTH BOOK

BOOK THE FOURTH

CHAPTER I

THE time had come for Claudia to speak, the time for plain speaking.

Let it be so, then: Claudia was ready.

They were in the boudoir. Dinner was over. They had got through that mercifully without disaster. Claudia had heard bare facts, nothing more; for, coming in from making herself scarce for the afternoon, — a drive to call upon friends of her own on the further side of the county, — she had effected her purpose of effacement so thoroughly that she had left herself time for no more than a few minutes' talk with Ann before the dressing-bell sounded. But she had heard enough. Her mind was made up. Ann had listened to him and had refused him. The time had come.

"You did n't ask him?" Claudia said.

After all their talk, the admissions of only a few days ago, the wonderful expectation and the active upbuoying happiness of yesterday and of that very morning, Ann had not asked him.

"There was nothing to ask."

"How do you mean — nothing to ask?"

Ann looked at her patiently, as if she would say,

"You rather force me, don't you, Claudia?" but she did not, yet, at any rate, look at her as if she challenged her right. Claudia could be patient, too. She intended to be patient. She was prepared even for the need of patience. She was prepared also, it may be, to hear her right challenged.

"Oh, well, it just was n't marriage to him," Ann said; "the thought of marriage was n't in his mind."

"The possibility," Claudia murmured.

Ann accepted that.

"The possibility, if you like," she said. She gave a little laugh. "That seems to have come with his discovery that he loved me."

"Oh, he does love you?" Claudia said.

"He appears to have found out that he does," Ann said.

Good Lord! Claudia thought to herself, what more did the woman want! Of her love for Ann, even in her exasperation, she corrected 'woman,' to 'dear woman,' to 'dear, good, prejudiced, blinded woman' — no, 'blind,' not blinded, and unseeing rather than blind.

"If he loves you . . ." she said.

"He went," Ann said. "It's unanswerable."

"He went," Claudia said, speaking low but very distinctly, "because he thought he was meant to go — because he did n't know, anyway, that he was n't meant to go."

"What do you mean, Claudia?"

"Just exactly what I say, Ann. He did n't know that you expected him not to go."

"Not to go! That I expected . . . He — he did n't know!"

Claudia nodded. All the colour ebbed from Ann's face. Claudia looked away. She could not bear to see that.

"It does n't mean that he did n't care," she said. "He did care. I believe he cared dreadfully. I believe he has always cared. But something was happening which had happened before — the sort of thing that did happen to him."

Ann's scared eyes were on Claudia's face. She did not even yet wholly grasp what Claudia meant.

Claudia saw that she must be more explicit.

"It's we who are to blame," she said — "our sex. You know what he's like, even to look at. Is it possible you don't guess — that you don't know — what life must have shown him? Why, one has only to look at him. I don't pretend to understand these things. They are, and that's all about it. Do you remember" — Claudia smiled in all her seriousness — "do you remember what I said the first time I saw him? It was the day I arrived. He passed us on horseback, do you remember, when you were bringing me from the station. I said no one ought to be so good-looking. No one ought to be allowed to be."

Ann, in spite of her desperation, — or because of it, — snatched at a side-issue.

"I don't think him so very good-looking. There are plenty of faults in his face —"

"And not one line that any one would wish different — any woman, at all events. You know as well as I do that it is n't a question of correctness. He's good-looking in the sense that I mean. There's something — a quality in his good looks. I'll grant you, if you like, that good looks are n't necessary. The quality can be there without looks at all. Goodness! there was a horrible little purser on board the ship I went out in — spotty, even! — but he had it, whatever it is, and all the ladies'-maids and the stewardesses were in love with him. I had a maid in those days — Boulter — and the trouble I had with her! Scenes, tears, whimsies; she was positively ill. No harm came of it, but that was n't poor Boulter's fault. But — this is my point — no one could have blamed the dreadful little purser if harm had come of it."

Ann sat quite still, her eyes on Claudia's face. No needlework engaged her fingers that night, or Claudia's fingers either; the occasion, by unspoken agreement, too grave for distractions. There were lines on Ann's smooth forehead. She heard Claudia in silence, her flickering eyelids trying the words as they fell.

"You asked him nothing," Claudia said, "and so he told you nothing. He might not have been able to tell you if you had asked him. But he might — oh, he might. How is it that I see and that you

don't? You admit that you care for him, and you don't see!"

"What is it that you do see, Claudia?"

"I'm telling you, Ann." She caught her breath and released it with a little protesting sound. "You say he went. Very well, he did go. He went because he did n't dream that you would marry him."

"But," Ann said in protest, in very stupefaction — "but . . ."

She did not finish. She could not.

"Yes, I know," Claudia said. "That's the pity of it and the dreadfulness. But surely, surely some of the pity may be extended to him for what should have made such a thing possible. Where our sex is concerned he's always been the victim of his own appeal. He has n't an ounce of conceit — I don't mean that. I doubt whether he even realizes. I don't suppose he argues about it or thinks about it. It's there. We know it's there. Why, if I know it's there when I've only seen him three times . . . if I knew it was there the first time I did see him . . . ! Something that makes one want to give — the decent ones among us, that is! — and something that makes the other sort want to get. And I'm not altogether blaming the other sort either. I don't know that I'm blaming any one. It's tragic, but, oh, my goodness! oh, my goodness! it's comic, too!"

She came to a stop and she laughed; tears, all the same, as once before, very near the shining eyes.

Ann shifted her position, but did not speak. Claudia spoke again.

"And more than half of his appeal is innocent. He's like a big boy. He is a boy whatever his age may be. Oh, he's old enough to 'know better' — no one need tell me that! But he is a boy. He'll never grow up. There are men who never do grow up. They grow older — and he's grown older (and that's you, Ann!). I saw that at Brighton; a line or two in his face; a look in his eyes — but they never grow up and women want to mother them. And that's an excuse, a plea, rather, for them — even, perhaps, the other sort. But for the moment it's not the excuses or the pleas for them that concern us. It's the pleas for him. And it is n't exactly pleas, either, that I'm putting forward. It's an explanation. All his life a demand has been made upon him. Something has been offered him — put in his way. Oh, if it's got to be stated more plainly, thrown at his head."

Ann drew back with a little cry. She was white now to the lips.

Claudia gasped.

"No, no, no!" Claudia said quickly, leaning forward as Ann drew back. "Don't, for Heaven's sake, misunderstand me." She caught her hands. "Don't you see what I mean and what I don't mean? Can't you distinguish? Don't you see that it was on a background of that, that you, altogether different, came to him? Altogether different. Ann, you shan't

misunderstand me! He knew you were different. My goodness! of course he knew! He thought of you as miles above him. He had n't dared — no, that is n't the word. He had n't let himself hope, or even imagine, that you would think of him as a husband. He did afterwards. Oh, he did afterwards when he thought he had done for himself. The tragedy for you and for him — and for me, since I sent you to him — was that it was to some one with those experiences behind him that you came that night in the garden. And you were defenceless. You were unprepared . . ."

She broke off, sobbing. Ann was sobbing, too. But Ann was drawing her hands from her. Claudia tried to retain them, but Ann said, "Let go! Oh, let go!" and she released them.

There were a few moments of sheer dismay when, to all Claudia's attempts to soothe her, Ann with averted face would only answer, "Let me alone! Oh, let me alone! Why can't you let me alone!"

"But I've hurt you," Claudia said.

Ann struggled for her handkerchief.

"Yes, you have," she said. "You may well say that. You've . . . shamed me. I was n't too proud of myself before . . . shamed me . . . humbled me to the dust . . ."

"You know I did n't want to do that," Claudia said. "I was trying to show you why you should n't be or feel hurt."

"By showing me, however different you may say

that I am from the others, that I just did behave like the others."

Claudia was silent for a moment or two, considering, weighing chances. Then, her own face growing very white, she said steadily: —

"Perhaps it's necessary that you should see what he saw, Ann."

Her fear was that Ann would get up and go out of the room; refuse to listen; refuse, it might be, to have anything more to do with her. In a throbbing lull when time, measured actually by a few seconds, seemed as in the breathless space between a flash and an explosion, to be suspended or unbearably prolonged, Claudia envisaged what a rupture between her and Ann would mean. The tension was horrible. If Ann moved suddenly. Or if she did not move . . .

Claudia could have screamed.

The striking of the clock upon the mantelpiece broke the spell. Simultaneously she and Ann remembered that at any moment now the servants would come in with the urn and the tea-tray. Claudia breathed again, and, drying her own eyes, quickly but without hurry, saw Ann dry hers. Little beads stood on Claudia's forehead, but she took up a book, and Ann went over to the writing-table, which had its back to the room. A lady reads and a lady writes. It was into an atmosphere of unsuspicious calm, of normal, unquestionable domesticity, that five min-

utes later the servants and the tea-tray — symbols of an unalterable routine — made their quiet, unobservant entrance.

Ann, over her shoulder, said, "Make tea for me, Claudia."

Claudia, not to be outdone, said, "In half a minute, Ann; I must just get to the bottom of the page."

So they combined to sustain the appearances which were yet quite unmenaced.

Had the necessities of the moment saved them? Claudia, trembling now, her limbs like water so that her hand would hardly support the weight of her book, did not know. It seemed ages before she heard a sound from the writing-table behind her. Then she heard Ann tearing up the sheet of paper on which she had been writing or pretending to write. The pause gave her time to recover herself.

Ann came over and began mechanically to make the tea which neither of them wanted. Claudia saw her face, and knew what the effort of the tranquil back which she had presented to the room must have cost her.

"Are you very angry with me?"

"I don't know, Claudia. I suppose I've no right to be angry. No, I've certainly no right to be angry with you. I've put myself outside the right to be angry at all."

"Well, don't be angry with me, Ann. You've every right to be, but don't, or we come to a dead-

lock, and we must n't — we must n't. This has got to be talked out. I'm — I'm — come here, Ann! — I'm shaking all over. You'll think I'm pretending, for I'm quite capable of shaking on purpose, but I'm not. I'm in desperate earnest."

"Am I such a beast?" Ann said.

Claudia shook her head, smiling through her tears.

"It's I that feel a beast — such a miserable little beast! Because I know myself, perhaps. Oh, I have n't any illusions about myself. I do use all our weapons when I have to. I'd use cunning and sophistry and anything that would help me. I was n't born a woman for nothing. I'd try all the expedients — the tricks. It's only you who are above the tricks that could make me ashamed, for in my heart I know I'm quite shameless. But in this I'm absolutely sincere. Will you listen to me?"

"You are trembling, Claudia!"

"I've taken upon myself. I feel rather like Abraham pleading for the Cities of the Plain."

"It is n't as bad as that!" Ann said.

Was it tricks? Was it Claudia's abominable cleverness?

Whatever the contributing causes, the tension, temporarily, at least, was relaxed. Claudia could speak again and Ann could listen.

"What I want to know is how you know," Ann said. "Did he tell you all this?"

"He hardly said a word."

"Then you're only guessing!"

"But guessing right," Claudia answered. "I believe I said that to you once before. I know things. I do guess right. It's the quality of my defects. It's my femininenes s. It's all that I've just been admitting to you."

The flicker of humour had passed from Ann's face.

"Then you don't even know about the others?"

"Oh, don't I?" Claudia said.

"About what you called the other sort?"

"I know about them best of all. Though I don't know — in the sense that I have n't a vestige of evidence to produce — I do know. I'd stake my life on it."

"But how do you know?"

"I just do know. I always know. There are women that you could n't talk to for five minutes without knowing — well, that! Oh, *you* could talk to them for hours and not know — forever, perhaps. But I could n't."

She paused, sorely tempted to use names. What was Lady Mallard that she should spare her? What was that good-natured, likable trollop, Lady Fotheringham, that she should spare her? Sorely, sorely tempted! For a moment she felt reckless. But she would be wholly unjustified. She had no proofs. She had less than no proofs. She was guessing wildly, if, as she felt in her very bones, she was guessing right. Two light women. Very well, that might be

so, but on what grounds, what conceivable grounds, did she couple them, light as they might be, with him? They were there. He was there. Flint, steel, the spark? She had not even seen the spark. No, out of the question. But she knew. Oh, she knew.

"And if it's true," Ann said — "if you're right in what you think, am I to take their — their leavings?"

"*He's* not *their* leavings," Claudia said. It was almost a cry. She was on sure ground there. "My goodness, Ann! *he's* not *their* leavings."

"What do you mean?"

"They're *his*. That's what you don't see. They are *his* leavings. You've been privileged — I *will* use the word — to make them his leavings. They were his leavings from the moment he loved you."

It was Ann who gasped now. But, in spite of her, her heart leapt. Her eyes, round, still with the apprehensive look, and with the traces of tears under them, searched Claudia's face. Claudia's eyes met hers unblinking.

There was another pause. Now, if Claudia had been wise, she would have retired, leaving this new thought to soak in. She made her one false move.

"You can't send him back to them," she said; "you can't. It's what you will be doing if you send him away. Back irretrievably this time. And after getting him away. My goodness, Ann! what do you want? Is n't it enough?" She was carried along blindly by an indignation which she should have

known how to control. She said it "would n't be fair." She said it would be "downright wicked." She lost her pretty head, in short. "Ann, you must bear with me. What happens with the rest of his life is in your hands. There's a straight line and there's a crooked line, and if he takes the crooked line, it's you who will be responsible."

Ann clasped her hands. She unclasped them. She moved a cup; pushed it away. Claudia had gone too far.

"I think I am bearing with you," she said in a strangled voice. "You find plenty to say for him. Oh, I dare say there is plenty. What of me? You forget what I've had to bear all along — what I've had to bear from him and for him. He went away . . . left me . . . I was left to — to — my God, Claudia! I'm only flesh and blood. Can anything more be required or even asked of me? I've borne his child . . ."

The woman truly is broken on the wheel and the man goes free. Claudia, watching Ann helplessly (and perceiving only too well the mistake which she had made), experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling and knew herself at the mercy once more of those thoughts which had possessed her at Brighton, when, for a few ugly moments, she had hated the man and all men for his sake. She set her teeth and watched, enduring what she saw with every nerve exposed, jarred, on edge. And she must begin her labours

afresh. She had achieved something and lost it; built and knocked down. Well, to her task once more. But she was tempted in another direction now.

CHAPTER II

TEMPTED! Her nerves ajar. Tempted! Two birds with one stone!

She had only for blessings to give cursings; for pleadings, to denounce. Ann would turn then and defend what she herself had denounced. She would defend the man who had hurt her, as a mother defends her young.

So easy a way! Infallible, moreover. The thing was established. It was common experience, common knowledge! Interfere between the wife and the husband who is ill-treating her, and the wife will turn upon you and fight you, — fight you for the husband's right to beat her, — and, fighting you, be reconciled to him. And Ann — representing the wife — was in love. If she had said that she was not, — and she had not said that, — Claudia would still have known that she was in love. She loved the man in spite of the suffering he had caused her. More, she loved him because of the suffering he had caused her. Claudia saw all the weapons ready to her hand (which was her tongue!) if she would but be unscrupulous enough to use them. And, smarting as she was, tingling, itching, she longed to use them. She had found, as Ann had told her, plenty to say for him, but if it came to what there was that could be said on the other side . . . what was

there not that could be said against him? The lover who rides away . . . the betrayer . . . There were words for such men . . . crudities, coarsenesses of the Elizabethans and of the Restoration — oh, she would find them! It would not be words that would fail her. Nothing would fail her. And, lashing him, she would be lashing Ann, and Ann, doubly lashed, goaded, stung, would rise and fight . . . and the end — the defeat of Claudia which would be Claudia's victory — would justify the means. She could see Coram recalled . . .

Sorely, sorely tempted, Claudia! She opened her mouth to speak — and paused.

Tricks, tricks, the femininities! And she had told Ann that, though she was capable of using them, she was not using them. And the whole thing would be a lie, grossly unfair to Coram, who trusted her, whose cause lay in her hands; unfair to Ann also. Not thus must these two win to one another. Coram was not what she would have called him. He was not unworthy. It was her part to make Ann see the good which she, Claudia, knew to be in him. She turned from the temptation, relinquishing it, perhaps, rather than thrusting it behind her, but rejecting it finally. She braced herself anew and let Ann weep.

CHAPTER III

THE urn on the neglected tea-table was still hissing and rumbling. The sound caught her ear and presently her attention. It was as if there was a deliberate intention on the part of the urn to attract her notice. If it was her admiration that it wanted, it had that always. Its beautiful lines could not but please the eye, its proportions with their rhythm and balance, its shining copper surface, the gracious hanging rings which were its handles, the cunning workmanship of the little ivory-mounted lever tap . . .

Hissing and rumbling, humming like a hive . . .

"Did I not," said the urn, — "did I not, by my timely appearing on the agitated scene, save one situation? Might I not be trusted, perhaps, if not to save, at least to ease, another?"

Claudia arose, understanding at last. Routine to the rescue, commonplaces, the calming influences of the normal, the ordinary. Ann had begun and abandoned. The water which she had poured into the cups to warm them was growing cold. Claudia emptied and warmed afresh. The tea was made, she found, but was very strong from its long standing. She poured some of it away and filled up the teapot once more, ready now to hear, and, interpreting, to read approval into the pleasant, familiar sound of

the gurgling fall of the water. Then, as in the night of watching in the nursery, she brought a cup to Ann.

Ann refused it.

She stood beside her with the cup in her hand. Her hand was still not quite steady. Ann took the cup from her.

CHAPTER IV

THEY went over the ground again inch by inch. When Claudia softened, Ann was inclined to soften. When Ann softened, Claudia was more than inclined to soften. Sometimes they both hardened simultaneously. But softening, it may be said, answered ultimately to softening. The tensest moments were those in which Ann heard for the first time of Claudia's letter. For Claudia, self-pledged to straightforwardness, made her confession. Her confession ("You'll be angrier than ever, Ann. I wrote to him") constituted the one bit of ground theretofore untrodden. Claudia recognized the dangerous nature of that piece of ground as she stepped on to it, but — did she not feel herself pledged? — it had to be trodden — goodness! and re-trodden! — like the rest.

They came to this new ground by the way of the old. Ann, melted as a woman by the tea, or by the unsteadiness of Claudia's hand, or perhaps ashamed of the cry which she had allowed to escape her, — even if, indeed, it had been wrung from her, — had held out the olive branch frankly.

"I believe it's you who bear with me, Claudia!"

Claudia laughed.

"We'll say, if you like, that we bear with each other."

She was prepared for surprises, but hardly for Ann's next words.

"What do you want me to do?" Ann said.

For a second or two Claudia almost held her breath. But she was not deceived. She was not absolved from her confession. The end was not yet.

"To bear with *him*," she said.

"How can I? How am I to? Claudia, how am I to? I ask you!"

"You only can," Claudia said, pursuing her policy of inch-by-inchness, "if you can manage to believe in him."

"But" — the old, old ground! — "I did believe in him. I believed in him absolutely. Absolutely. That's why I find myself where I am to-day — where I was the day after he left me. Oh, Claudia, he left me! It all comes back to that. There's no getting away from it."

"No, there is n't," Claudia said quietly. "I don't pretend that there is. But" — Patience! How many times must she say this? — "he did n't know. That 's what you're ignoring. That's what it really comes back to."

She waited a moment, and then said: "If he had known, nothing on earth would have taken him from you. If he'd known afterwards, oceans and continents would n't have kept him from you. Why, they have n't as it is. If only he had known, if only news could have reached him!" The moment had come. "There's something I'd better tell you, Ann,

while I'm about it . . ." She hardly hesitated. There should be no reservations now. "It is n't my fault that news *did n't* reach him."

Other silences had been awful in this room. Only one other, Claudia thought, had been quite like the pounding silence out of which Ann at last repeated her words.

"You wrote to him!"

"What was I to do?" Claudia said. "It was in those dreadful days when — when we knew — and when we did n't know where to go. You had told him not to write. Something had to be done. I thought so then, anyway, for even I did n't know the strength that was in you. Actually nothing was done, for my letter never reached him. You managed without him."

She looked at Ann now. The red wave which had flooded Ann's face again was again receding. It would leave her whiter than before.

"Ann, do say something. No, of course, I did n't ask him, if you want to know that. I would n't have asked him in any case, but there was no need. I had only to see him to know that my letter had n't reached him. I don't know what became of it. There was nothing in it that could have enlightened any one else, so it does n't matter what did become of it. I said there were reasons why he would wish to come home — no, I said might wish. I told him no one knew I was writing. Give me credit for some discretion, Ann."

"Why did n't you tell me?" Ann said.

"What would have been the use of that? Would you have let me write? Of course, you would n't."

Do what she would, Claudia could not altogether keep exasperation out of her voice.

"It may still reach him," Ann said.

"That's unlikely," Claudia said, more humbly. "But it's possible. I can't deny that."

"Then he would know whether I told him or not."

Poor Ann. She had, indeed, something to get accustomed to. Never in the days of the years of a sheltered pilgrimage had life shewn itself to her before in such uncompromising nakedness. And she herself, before an inquisitor who was somehow Claudia, her own familiar friend, seemed to be stripped bare also. The inquisitor was kind, but she was ruthless . . . insisted . . . spared her nothing . . .

"Well, what's done is done," she said at last. "I won't say whether I think you were justified. Things were desperate enough to appear to justify you. There was . . . Johnny, — or there was to be Johnny — and if you'd succeeded, Johnny might have been saved, and for that — yes, I would have accepted any humiliation. But there is n't Johnny now. Nothing can alter his position — not all the humiliation in the world. I'm free, Claudia. I'm absolutely free. I've bought my freedom and paid for it. I managed without him, as you say. Why should I ask anything now?"

"You would n't be asking," Claudia said. "It's

he who is asking. You'd be giving. You'd be giving all through — giving Johnny his father, and giving Johnny's father his son, and, more, oh, more than that," she nodded gravely, "much more. Yes, Ann, I *am* thinking of his case. In some ways his case — now — is harder than yours."

"Have I a case at all?" Ann asked.

"What is he to me apart from you?" Claudia asked harshly.

There was silence again — Ann, pulled up, steadied, and a little ashamed, remembering what, after all, she owed to Claudia; Claudia, the pounding of her heart subsiding, conceding readily enough, inwardly, that in the matter of her interference she was being let down lightly by a grievously tried Ann. Each owed something to the other. But Ann, allowing herself to remember, knew suddenly that her debt to Claudia was past paying.

At that her thoughts swung back once more to the Claudia of the thousand engaging affectations who had stepped from the train on a day which seemed now as if it must have belonged to some earlier life. Even then Claudia, though she did not know it, was responding. The very invitation which had brought her was a cry for help. If Claudia had failed her then . . . if Claudia had failed her afterwards, had ever failed her . . .

And what poor Claudia had been let in for! What she had been drawn into! If it was she who had precipitated the catastrophe, that gave her the more

rights — gave her rights which, but for that (but for what she had spoken of once as her meddling), she would not have had at all. She had rights. Indisputably she had rights. Was she, perhaps, even justified?

Claudia became conscious that Ann again had softened. At once the answering softness made itself felt in her. Another meeting-point seemed to have been reached.

Now, if something would happen! What could happen?

If Coram would walk in! If Coram himself would but walk in there and then! Her eyes sought the clock. The hour it gave her made any such chance unlikely. Yet, if he could but divine that this was his moment. It was his moment. She looked at the door, almost expecting to see it opened and to hear him announced. She listened for the sound of approaching steps . . .

Nothing happened.

No help was to be looked for but that which by patience and perseverance she could herself supply, or wrest from a passive Ann. She returned to her attack. We may be spared repetitions; Claudia, less fortunate, might not. Inch by inch. Inch by inch. Ann heard her, making no sign.

Eleven o'clock struck, and twelve.

Ann remembered that Zélie would be sitting up for her. This, rather than an arrival at any agree-

ment, brought the evening to a finish. Ann put out the lamps. Claudia lit the candles.

Outwardly, nothing seemed to have been achieved. But two friends had not quarrelled, and this in itself, while it spoke for the qualities of both of them, seemed, to one of them, to mean something more than that the bonds of an old friendship had stood heroic tests. They parted for the night, moreover, upon a note of passable cheerfulness — though that, as Claudia perceived, may have had no more to account for it than expediency, since Zélie, yawning for her mistress, was in the room at the door of which they spoke their good-nights. On the whole, however, Claudia was not dissatisfied. She had, at least, contrived to get those things said which it was most important that Ann should hear. On so much she might sleep, and she was so tired, and Ann was so tired, that she believed that, as before, after just such a disquieting evening, they would both sleep.

Claudia, tired out, slept. Ann, to her own surprise, slept also.

Was everything to repeat itself in a piling-up of repetitions? The morning brought, not a Coram, but a Bulkley — and a Bulkley, if, from his point of view, to pour out his gratitude to Ann for the benefaction of which Mr. Pargiter's letter had just apprised him, from Ann's, for no other purpose than again — oh, again! to be the bearer of the news that Coram, whom, say what she would, she had been expecting,

was gone! That repetition, at least, Ann thought that *she* might have been spared. She was to be spared nothing, it seemed.

"The third time he will stay," Claudia said.

"There won't be a third time," Ann said, and closed her lips.

CHAPTER V

THE days passed.

Ann was unapproachable again. Her attitude was, "We won't speak of it. I have listened to you. You can't say I did n't listen. I've done my part as you have done yours. If he had been here . . . but he is n't. That finishes it. Now I am picking up the threads of my life again. You can see that I am not fretting. I'm not even unhappy. There are other things in life besides love. I shall find them. I am finding them."

Mr. Bulkley, who boasted no superstitions, was to be married in May, and Ann, having constituted herself his fairy godmother, played the part generously. Lower Redmayne was to be overhauled and put in order at once for the reception of the bride. Ann, keenly interested and full of ideas, spent a morning with Mr. Bulkley and Mr. Cranbourn (of Cranbourn and Newington, Builders, Decorators, and Sanitary Engineers, of Windlestone), going over the house and making many suggestions for the comfort of its future mistress. In the country comparatively few of the smaller country-houses had been modernized. Bathrooms were not general then. Bulkley, and Coram before him, and generations before them, had been content to tub in their rooms. Ann was determined that Lower Redmayne should

have its bathroom. She it was who found the spot where the bathroom could be added.

"You're bent on spoiling us," Bulkley protested. "The future Mrs. Bulkley has n't been accustomed to such luxuries."

"Let me have my own way," Ann said, smiling. She was really interested, really, as she had intimated to Claudia, quite happy. She forgot nothing — not even to consult Mrs. Somers.

Mrs. Somers, still sore over her recent disappointment, and perhaps too long accustomed to a bachelor establishment to view the prospective advent of a mistress (where she herself had been mistress for so many years) with any noticeable enthusiasm, showed that day her first signs of recovering her normal cheerfulness, and even of melting. Mrs. Forrester suggested a new kitchen range. If Mrs. Somers had a cherished wish, it was for a new kitchen range.

"Not," she said, "but what I don't believe, too, in roasting before the fire. Still, an open range is awkward."

"Tell Mr. Cranbourn exactly what you want," Ann said.

"They pay for themselves, 'm, do they not, sir, in the saving of coal?"

Mrs. Somers was to have the range of her dreams.

Ann, and Bulkley also, looked at the old-fashioned open grate with its glowing bars, and felt a vague regret to know it doomed — Ann, though it was she

herself who had doomed it. It might be inconvenient but it had its very real part in the beauty of the old-fashioned kitchen. It 'went' with the ancient dresser, and the willow-pattern plates and dishes, and the shining copper saucepans. It conjured up sounds and savours — the ticking and the clicking of a spit, the cracklings and splutterings of spurting fat, the sudden released hiss from an opened oven door, the ecstatic frenzy of the basting; odours of roastings and toastings, of cake-makings and bread-bakings. It stood momentarily to both of them for the symbol of the things that must pass. But Mrs. Somers, in the interests of the bride's housekeepings, and incidentally even of the bride (and thus of Bulkley himself), must be placated.

"It'll be all as easy again," Mrs. Somers said. She began to look forward.

So Ann occupied herself.

Where was Coram? Presently Claudia heard that he was in London. It was from London, anyway, that he had written to congratulate Bulkley upon his approaching marriage. So much Claudia gathered, with other matter, such as that his aunt had not proved to be so ill as had been supposed, and that his visit thus seemed to have been needlessly interrupted. Bulkley, though he shared Mrs. Somers's grievance, was now so actively busied with his own happy concerns that he could content himself with the thought that his friend should be his and his Stella's first

visitor after their marriage; and Mrs. Somers, cheering up, said, "Well, that's something, anyway," if her face fell a little at the recollection — expressed, to Bulkley's amusement, and to Claudia's as he related it to her — that all the same now she could no longer expect that the Master should be given his old room!

In London, was he? Claudia had to be content that he should not yet be on his way to Cathay or Kamchatka. While he was in England there was hope — nay, though he had been at the ends of the earth, there would have been hope. But her dread undoubtedly had been, and was, perhaps, still, to hear that he had started again on his travels. Something must happen. She was sure of that. Not for nothing could she be so sure.

She looked at Ann, wondering what went on behind the placid front she showed to the world. Impossible to say. Ann pursued an even way, calm to all appearance, cheerful. She devoted herself to Johnny openly, spending more and more of her time with him. The sight of Ann and Johnny and his nurse or his nurses in the big Redmayne barouche was one to which Fotheringham and Windlestone and the roads of the neighbourhood were evidently to become accustomed. Even Claudia saw that there was now no further occasion for caution. Johnny, it was evident, was unquestioningly accepted. His recent serious illness had removed the last need for restraint. To a pet dog so threatened

and so saved a fond mistress would have been expected to show an increased devotion. Ann, always wise, might give herself rope and be in no danger of hanging herself. Ann, taking advantage of circumstances, gave herself more rope joyfully and smiled at Claudia. Claudia smiled back. They could almost be said to be happy. But was Ann happy except in her relations with Johnny? Could she be happy? And Cor m? Claudia's heart ached for him also.

Ann began to talk once more of altering the boudoir. Claudia did not say, "Oh, Ann! This lovely room!" as she had said on an occasion ages ago when Ann had first surprised her with an expression of her dissatisfaction with its decorations and appointments. Her own eye had been trained, maybe, by and to the austerer beauty of those parts of the house (the rest of it, practically) upon which the rather deplorable taste of the period had not worked its meretricious will.

Ann said, "This satin. All these buttons. And does one ever really use these hanging screens?"

But there, for the time being, the matter rested. She did not begin the task of discarding. Time enough for that. She wished, perhaps, for a clear idea of what she wanted to construct before she should demolish. The room was, at least, very comfortable.

Was there an inner life that Ann was leading now — a life behind the life which was visible to Claudia who watched and could not help watching? Sometimes Claudia fancied that she caught glimpses

through the veils with which Ann shrouded herself — glimpses of what? And what were these veils? And were there veils? Perhaps there were no veils. Perhaps Ann was really calm. Perhaps the revulsion of feeling was complete, and she had not so much put the thought of Coram from her heart as lost interest in one who had failed her. Love is liable to such revulsions. Not the least of the tragedies to which love is subject. It might be that Ann, indeed, no longer loved Coram, and if she no longer loved him, if she had reached the stage of indifference, the next stage could only be that of a distaste for him which nothing would overcome. Love may sleep and wake out of sleep, but who shall bring dead love back to life? Was Ann's love dead? Claudia did not think it. Looking at Ann's face, at her tranquil eyes, at the mouth which showed no bitter lines, Claudia did not think it.

Then one day something happened. So small a thing. There had been a week of cloudy skies and cold rains. The spring had been, as it were, held up. There had been a setback. All development had been arrested. Snowflakes had fallen and nature had first paused, then retreated. A pinched look had come over the woods and the hedges and the fields. Biting winds nipped buds ready to burst. Tender leaves, tempted out too soon, shrivelled. Sheep huddled together under the lee of a fence or a coppice. In less sheltered places lambs died. For seven days winter reigned. The birds' chorus was

hushed, the isolated songs of hardier spirits only serving to point the cessation of the jubilant sounds. Little dead rooks, naked and pitiful, lay here and there under the elms on the cold wet ground. For seven days the sun hid himself. Winter, winter, winter, the lengthened days seeming to lay stress on a universal desolateness. At twilight you were glad to shut out the decline of each cheerless day.

Then, as suddenly as the temperature had fallen, the temperature rose. The clouds rolled away, the wind fell, the sun shone forth. The sun was hot. He seemed to have stored up heat in his recess. He flooded the land with his warmth. The rush of the spring began that day. Pent saps flowed. You could almost see the leaves unfolding. What you did not see you felt.

"Look at the green crinkles," Claudia said. "Look at these little, little leaves. Look! creased like a baby's wrists and ankles. Like Johnny's. Don't you want to stroke them — kiss them? Ann, I saw one move. I swear it."

"Claudia, you're ridiculous."

But Ann liked Claudia's ridiculousness, and Claudia knew it.

"And the birds," Claudia said. "Listen."

Solos and a chorus. A chorus and solos. A chorus made up of solos.

"God *is* in his Heaven," Claudia said; "all *is* right with the world."

"I never doubted it," Ann said.

Was that an indication, an intimation? Or was it in itself one of the veilings?

And then, louder than the chorus — or how could you have heard it? — softer than the chorus — for its softness was what distinguished it from the rest — another sound.

Cuckoo. Cuckoo. Cuckoo . . .

It was from that day that the watching Claudia, who yet watched so unobtrusively that she did not appear to be watching at all, noticed a difference. Ann became restless. This showed itself in many small ways. Chiefly it showed itself in withdrawals, desultorinesses, breakings-off. She would go from a room and come back to it. She would begin things and not finish them. She would seat herself at the piano and leave it without having played, or she would stop playing in the middle of a bar. She did not, however, seem to be driven, as once she had been driven. It was rather as if she were awaking to some voice — whether from within or without Claudia could not tell — which laid behests on her that she knew not how to perform or was reluctant to perform. It called her away from whatever she might be doing. It called her often to the nursery and Johnny, but often it only called her, Claudia believed, into one or another of the many empty rooms. It called her into the garden. Claudia could see her really listening, when it was into the garden that it called her.

How the cuckoo called that year! The countryside pulsed with his calling. His calling was as the audible sound of a pulse or of the spring itself breathing. Was it he who was disturbing?

At that, something tugged at Claudia's mind. Somewhere, somewhen, she or Ann had spoken of the cuckoo. Not lately. Not for a long time. But here, she thought, at Redmayne. When, then? Why? In what connection?

Suddenly she remembered. Some words of Ann's came back to her with words of her own. She had asked Ann how it came that at that time of year she was not in London. Across a gulf of nearly two years she remembered Ann's answer word for word.

"I think it was the cuckoo," Ann had said, "that was primarily responsible. I heard him one day — or rather I listened to him."

Ann had distinguished between hearing and listening, and this, perhaps, had prompted Claudia's next question. That, too, she remembered.

"What did he tell you?"

How well she remembered!

"To open my eyes and look about me."

"And *I* said," Claudia said to herself, "that that was the Serpent's advice to Eve, and Ann said that nevertheless she thought she would take it."

Claudia had it all. How significant these words — idle words then — seemed now! Ann had listened to the Serpent, indeed. That appeared to connect the cuckoo with her first disturbance; it was

quite plainly the sound of the cuckoo that had disturbed Ann again now.

There was something which Ann wanted to do and dared not do, or was urged to do and shrank from doing. Some call had been made to her in the cuckoo's call. Would she answer it?

CHAPTER VI

ONE day, towards the end of April, Ann went on a short journey. She did not tell Claudia where she was going, nor ask her to accompany her.

"Can you amuse yourself to-morrow for a few hours?" she said the evening before. "I have to leave you for the afternoon."

"My dear, of course."

That was all. The next day at two o'clock, luncheon having been put forward by half an hour, the carriage took Ann to the station, where she dismissed it with instructions that it was to come back for her at a quarter to six. Then, the carriage gone, she went into the booking-office and took a ticket. The ticket she took was for Handleton, and Handleton was a village some eighteen miles down the line. The clerk in the booking-office, as he gave her the ticket, said, "Handleton, 'm," as if to make sure that he had heard aright. And Ann said, "Yes, Handleton."

The name, upon which stress thus seemed to be laid, was commonplace enough. But it might have conveyed something to Claudia. It was because, though it might not, it yet equally might, have conveyed something to her, that Ann had not mentioned it. Yet (and here was food for thought) she hardly knew why she should not wish Claudia to

know that her errand was to Handleton. As she waited for the train, she smiled to herself at the booking-clerk's implied surprise. What, it seemed to say, could Mrs. Forrester of Redmayne have to do at Handleton?

The train came in and she took her seat. She chose an empty compartment, and she let down both windows and sat with the soft but keen spring airs stirring the furs at her throat. She was very simply dressed — much more simply dressed than the lady who had once walked through a wood. Her dark clothes were in rather striking contrast to the brightness of the day. But though she had clad herself in sober hues on a day which gave and asked for colour, her mental and spiritual aspect was in no way sombre. She did not look unhappy. She was a little paler than usual, but her pallor was the pallor of intentness, not of unhappiness, and her expression, her general appearance apart, had something that was, indeed, actively reminiscent of that questing lady who, with a beating heart and wonder and anticipation in her eyes, had made her fateful voyage of exploration and discovery.

The train was a slow train or it would not have stopped at the station she wanted. It stopped everywhere — at Crossway, Landon Stoke, Crown Ash, Medsley, villages which Ann knew on her drives, but to none of which had she ever before gone by train. Her drives in the direction in which she was travelling had not taken her beyond Medsley.

Handleton, when she should reach it, would be new ground to her. This expedition, then, like that other, was one of exploration.

No one got into her carriage at any of the stations at which the train stopped. Ann would see a single porter, and one or two persons, on an otherwise empty platform. One or two passengers would alight. The porter would shut the doors. From the window Ann would see the passengers who had alighted give him their tickets as they passed. At Crown Ash there were milk-cans which were rolled along with much noise. There was a farmer with a couple of dogs on a leash. There were three women with market-baskets. There was a little girl with toothache — a bandaged face. No one she knew.

She was, as we say in the slipshod way of these days, 'just as glad.' Yet there was no mystery in her expedition. The air of mystery that it seemed to have was due to nothing more than that she had kept its purpose from Claudia. A mistress visits a former servant. What of mystery in that? There was no real reason why she should not have told Claudia. Ultimately, perhaps at once even, she would tell her. Claudia, with her "My dear, of course," had asked no questions. She had said no more, and made no opening for Ann to say more, not wishing, probably, to show that she even perceived the reticence that lay under Ann's announcement. Claudia's tact could be counted on at all times. But, as a woman, Ann could guess at Claudia's

guessings. The first of them — that she, Ann, was going to see Timothy Coram — would be dismissed immediately for its wildness; but that her expedition, whatever its nature, was connected in some way with him, would not be dismissed at all. Ann by her very reticence had made this sure. Was it, then, that in her present action she herself saw, and recognized that she saw, the seeds of capitulation? Perhaps she did, indeed, see them. The time, anyway, was not yet. There is a long time between seedtime and harvest.

The train as it left Medsley plunged into a tunnel. The air in the carriage became acrid, and Ann put up the windows. The effort, and the change from the brilliant light of the open day to the comparative gloom of the lamplight, diverted the current of her thoughts. A little pool of oil lay in the bottom of the glass of the lamp, and swayed with the swayings of the train. Ann watched it with the fascinated gaze of a child. It swayed this way, and a little more this way; then that, and perhaps a little more that; and then washed smoothly back again. It was as the outward and visible sign of the train's leanings. It never swayed very far, but it was also never quite still. She watched it, as if its movements held a meaning for her. They held no meaning. Presently, conscious of the strain of looking up, and of the discomfort of steadfastly regarding a flame, she turned her eyes away.

A long tunnel; blackness behind the panes, with here and there a glistening where the passing lights caught wet patches; a rushing blackness. The roar of the wheels seemed the sound of the rushing blackness. In the twilight of the compartment which she had chosen because it was empty or, more accurately, — since many others were empty also, — the emptiness of which she had welcomed, she began to feel lonely. She was glad when light showed on the walls of the tunnel, — the noise of the wheels taking quite a different sound, as if the roar of them had, indeed, been the sound of the rushing blackness, — and after a moment or two of rapidly diminishing darkness, the train emerged into the open.

She blinked in the blaze of light.

What did that remind her of? What memory stirred in her? Why, suddenly, did she think of magpies? Black, white — was it that? The black of the tunnel, the white of the sun's glare? That, yes; but not quite that. The blinking rather than what caused the blinking. She, in her turn, even as Claudia so recently in hers, traced a memory across the years to its source.

She was nearing Handleton now, and she saw that the country into which the train had issued from the tunnel was of an entirely different character from that which it had left on the other side of the hill. She had left the oaks and the elms and the beeches of her own country behind her, and was in a wilder country of pine and bracken and furze.

She was the only passenger to alight at Handleton — a little wayside station with its name picked out in white flints, and the usual single porter.

The porter was at the far end of the platform where stood more milk-cans. He put them into a van rapidly — with no unnecessary noise, Ann observed — and then came towards Ann for her ticket. She had not really been kept waiting, for the gate which led from the station to the road was at the end of the platform where the milk-cans had been standing; but as he touched his cap he said, "Beg pardon, 'm," and she understood that he was apologizing to her for having seen to the milk-cans before attending to her.

"I've no luggage," Ann said.

As he put out his hand for her ticket he withdrew it suddenly, before taking the ticket from her, to touch his cap once more, with another but somehow a different sort of "I beg pardon, 'm." Then he remembered the train, shut the door of the carriage from which Ann had stepped, and gave the guard his signal.

Ann, her attention thus called to him, found herself considering him. He seemed to have recognized her. He was about twenty-four, perhaps a little older, and what struck you first in his appearance was his firm, upstanding figure. He was unusually well built. You could see that the legs in the rough corduroy trousers were straight and shapely, and that the arms under the sleeves of his porter's

sleeved waistcoat were muscular and very strong. He was at once sturdy and lithe. All this she saw, though she only looked, perhaps, at his face. His face was comely and very kindly. He had clear blue eyes, frank in their expression, and a good mouth. He had unusually good white teeth. His attitude was that of a well-mannered, deferential servant.

"Have I seen you before?" Ann said.

"Oh, no, 'm. But I come from Fotheringham."

She supposed him to mean the station.

"Ah, then probably I have," she said.

The train had moved out of the station, and she began to walk up the platform towards the gate.

"Which is the way to the village?"

"Straight down the road yonder, 'm. About a quarter of a mile. You pass the crossroads, but keep straight on. You'll see the church, 'm, before you."

"Ah, it is the Rectory I want," Ann said.

"That's next to the church, 'm. The only big house. You can't miss it."

Ann thanked him and passed through the gate. He touched his cap again and went on to the signal-box. She saw him mount the steps.

She carried a pleasant impression of him down the sunny road — an impression of something in key with the sunny day.

The air was full of the scent of pines. Breathing it deeply into her lungs, Ann pursued her way.

When Lucy Edget left Redmayne she had gone to her home at Handleton. Ann had written to her mother, and had had some correspondence with the rector of the parish. Through the clergyman she had made provision for the girl's immediate future. There the matter had ended. She had sometimes wondered that, after the correspondence which had passed between her and Mr. Broxley while the necessary arrangements were being made, she should have heard no more from him, but, her own desperate troubles supervening, the matter had passed from her mind. From time to time it had come into her mind again. But she had done all that seemed to be required of her, had put the unhappy business into the hands best qualified to deal with it kindly and wisely, and it was not till she was at Brighton, recovering from her illness, that the thought of Lucy had come to her with any real persistence. She had not heard from Lucy herself since an answer she had received from her to a letter which she had written to her, in the very early days of all, to bid her be of good courage and to tell her that Mr. Broxley had promised that she should be looked after. Lucy would not identify her with what Mr. Broxley might do for her, for Ann had desired that her benefactions should not be associated with her name. It was not to be expected, then, that Lucy would write; but why had not Mr. Broxley written? Since those curious thoughts at Brighton, the wish to know what had become of her, and to know that all was

well with her, had been superseded by one more urgent still. This was a wish which, for all its urgency, perhaps even because of its very urgency, she had combated strenuously. She wished to see Lucy. She wished to hear from Lucy's own lips the answer to those questions which she had only dreamt — but had so strangely dreamt — that she had put to her. For all that it implied she had resisted this wish till she could resist it no longer. Here she was, then, on her way, if not to see Lucy, to discover, at least, where she was to be found.

She came to the crossroads and passed them. The tower of the church showed then above the trees on her right. A few minutes later she was ringing the bell at the Rectory.

An elderly maidservant answered her ring, and she asked for Mr. Broxley. She learnt at once why Mr. Broxley had not written. Mr. Broxley had died while she was abroad.

"Nearly a year and a half ago, 'm. We've been here close on fourteen months. It's the Reverend Sheffield now. The master was appointed to the living when the Reverend Broxley died. Yes, just close on fourteen months we've been here now."

Ann asked if Mr. Sheffield was in. He was out, she heard to her regret, and not expected in till late in the afternoon. There was no Mrs. Sheffield. The Reverend Sheffield was a widower. Would the lady like to leave any message?

But Ann had no message to leave.

"Can you tell me, perhaps, where Mrs. Edget lives?"

Mrs. Edget? Oh, yes. The Reverend Sheffield got his eggs off Mrs. Edget. Mrs. Edget lived in the cottage past the turnpike. The turn to the left at the crossroads. You kept straight on till you came to the turnpike, and then took the lane on your right. How far? About a mile and three quarters — well, to be on the safe side, say two miles. Distances were generally greater than one thought for. Say two miles.

Ann looked at her watch. She could just do it. But she would have no time to spare. And if Lucy was not living at home, she would not see Lucy. She would not be able to wait to see Lucy even if she should find that Lucy was still in the neighbourhood. She knew suddenly how she had counted on seeing Lucy.

She thanked the woman and turned away. The circumstances made it inexpedient that she should ask questions of a stranger. She did not know how far the circumstances might be known. As she was here she must go on to Mrs. Edget's, and, if Lucy was not there, leave the seeing of Lucy, if it should be possible to see her, to another day. She should have written to make enquiries before she came. She had acted on an impulse and regretted it.

She had reached the gate when she heard footsteps behind her.

"Would Mrs. Tillet do, 'm?"

"Mrs. Tillet?"

"Mrs. Edget's daughter, 'm?"

Ann's heart leapt.

"She lives quite near, 'm. Just through the village. The cottage by the blacksmith's. Any one will show you, 'm."

"Oh, thank you," Ann said. "Yes, I will go and see Mrs. Tillet. That may save me the walk. I am very much obliged to you."

And so, though the fates had seemed against her, her visit was like to be not entirely fruitless. A few minutes brought her to the blacksmith's.

The cottage just beyond it must be the cottage she sought. It stood back a little from the road, from which it was divided by a wooden paling. The garden behind this was very neatly kept.

Mrs. Edget might have other daughters, but Ann felt sure that in Mrs. Tillet she would find the Lucy Edget she had come to Handleton to see.

Some one was singing inside the cottage. Ann knocked. The singing did not cease for a moment or two, and then ceased.

The door opened.

Ann stayed with Lucy an hour; but in the course of that hour, ten minutes, though they talked much, gave her the answer to all she wished to know. She saw Lucy's boy, and held him in her arms. Lucy's face, by turns white and flushed, flushed with pleasure then. Lucy's boy, six months older than her

own, had, Ann was interested and somehow cordially pleased to recognize, the porter's clear blue eyes. Lucy's face was radiant when Ann welcomed joyfully her shy offer of tea. All but that ten minutes of enlightenment was, however, beside the point.

"Oh, 'm," was what Lucy said, "I don't defend myself. I can't. Wrong is wrong, 'm; I know that. But you've seen Tillet, 'm. It was a constant ache. I used to lie awake crying. I'm a working girl and a lady could n't understand."

"I think I can understand," Ann said gently.

"And I was weak, I know. Don't think Tillet was all to blame. An arm round one . . . but — here's where he was n't to blame — I — I wanted it round me. He was n't so much to blame as me, except he was n't thinking of marriage — not then. He was so young like to tie himself up. A woman wants to be bound. It comes natural to a woman, 'm, does n't it? But with a man, sometimes, it will be more of a surrender like. And afterwards, you see, I could n't bring myself to tell Tillet, and he did n't know. That's how it was. There was no excuse for me. I'd been brought up different. But, oh, 'm, I did n't seem to care and I was so dreadfully unhappy for him. It was a way . . . If I had n't, others would. You've seen Tillet. I wanted him . . ."

After a long pause:

"I'm very happy, 'm. Though I suppose people would say that I ought n't to be. And yet I don't know. You see Jimmy *was* born in wedlock."

After a longer pause:

"And Tillet, 'm, he's happy. At rest like. They let him alone. I suppose they wanted him, too. Sometimes I think . . ."

"Yes, Lucy?"

Lucy dried her eyes. Ann's own eyes were blinded.

"Tillet's a good husband. Sometimes I think I'm a very lucky woman."

CHAPTER VII

THREE days later Claudia was writing a letter. She had written one once which had not carried. This one would not miscarry.

Three things had happened; one for each day of the three days. She knew herself again to be meddling, but three things had happened. She smiled to herself at a thought. She had tried straightness. If something that she had done — something, rather, that she had not done — was not straight, she could not help it! But about the letter which she was writing she had no misgivings whatever. This, if it was flagrant meddling where she had silently implied that she would meddle no more, was not disloyalty. It was an act of courage — if of the courage that you had to take in both hands, shutting your eyes, holding your breath, waiting blindly (yet somehow with a twinkle in your closed eyes!) for what might follow.

Ann, who was proud, had yet no pettiness of pride, and had told her of her visit to Handleton, and what she had learnt there. The first of the three days gave her that, with all which that admitted and implied. Ann need only have kept silence, but Ann, impressed, perhaps, in spite of herself, had let her see; and Claudia, always clear-seeing, had seen.

The second day had brought her news that had made her heart stand still. She had met Bulkley and heard from him what she most feared to hear. Coram was going abroad.

"Abroad!" She startled him with the directness of her "When?" She had shot it at him without giving herself time to think.

"Almost at once. In a fortnight."

He looked his surprise. As Ann, before her, had once retrieved what she saw to be a blunder, so Claudia retrieved hers.

"Before your wedding?" she said.

"Yes. It's too bad of him. I can't make him out these times."

She saw that her red-herring had achieved its purpose. But she must know everything that he might have to tell her now.

"Abroad?" she said again. "You mean just the Continent — Italy or somewhere?"

She knew that he did not.

"No," he said. "That's it. Off on his travels again. Japan."

Japan! What Claudia (with Ann) thought of as the Other side of the World.

"The wandering spirit, indeed," Claudia said. "He'll come down, anyway, to say good-bye," she ventured, presently.

But Bulkley shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said. "I should say not, from what he says in his letter."

He was plainly perturbed.

"I can't make him out," he said again. "Mrs. Nanson, does he think, can he think, that I've turned him out?"

"He could n't think that," Claudia said. "No, you're strange creatures, Mr. Bulkley, — much stranger than we are. Just the wandering spirit. It takes you all sometimes."

She nodded and smiled and was moving away.

"The alterations nearly finished? Yes, I must come and see them. I'll get Mrs. Forrester to take me one day." Then, foresight, or a very inspiration, prompting her: "If Mr. Coram does n't come down we shall have to write him our good-byes. Is he still in London?"

"Brown's Hotel."

So much for what the second day gave her. All the rest of it she spent in a fever of perplexity. Whether to tell Ann now, or to wait till Ann heard, and be guided then by what she should see? Ann was melting. Her visit to Lucy had had profound results. Processes were at work in Ann at which Claudia, guessing, hardly dared to guess. But Ann was as strange as Claudia had told Bulkley that only men were. The day passed without her having told her.

The third day came with its giving. But, for our clear understanding of what the third day gave her, we must know what she had done with the hours of the first.

When the carriage had started which bore Ann to the station (Whitcombe, that nearer station which Redmayne sometimes used, and at which she, Claudia, had been met on the day when she arrived, and had seen Coram for the first time), Claudia, already intrigued and excited, but learning now from Ann's directions to the footman, that the mysterious expedition was taking her somewhere by train, went back into the house, making guesses really as wild as Ann's intuitions had divined. Something was happening. Claudia was sure of it. She did wonder for a moment whether Ann was going to meet Coram. This, as Ann supposed, she did reject for its improbability, but her joyous excitement did not abate. Rather did it increase. Her thoughts played round Ann, and everything that it was possible or impossible that Ann might be doing. She did not think of Lucy, Lucy's case naturally conveying nothing to her in its possible bearing on Ann's. But in every other direction her conjectures ranged more and more widely. She gave up her guessings when she perceived that this time she could not guess nor hope to guess, and resigned herself to waiting till Ann should tell her. If, that was, Ann should see fit to tell her! She believed that Ann would tell her. Meanwhile Whitcombe — the name with its associations — took her back to the beginnings of things. She remembered something that Ann had told her — something which had, as she had expressed it to herself at the time, loomed

large in all that Ann had told her, but which she had never understood. Ann had spoken to her of a walk which she had taken, and which had been the beginning of everything. A wood, a strange place in the wood, a statue in the strange place. What did these things mean? She had never been for this walk herself, seen the strange place, the mysterious statue. Why, when she came to think of it? It might have been looked for that Ann, as she had spoken of the spot, would have shown it to her. She had not shown it to her, nor suggested that she should visit it. But equally she had not said, had not so much as hinted, that she did not wish her to see it. She had, moreover, indicated its direction when she described it, spoken of the bridle path through the wood by which it was approached.

Claudia, in her preoccupation, had gone into the boudoir and was standing now at the window from which she had had that glimpse of Ann and Coram which had had such dire effects upon their joint and even their separate destinies. Perhaps if she had not seen their parting then, and the look with which Coram had followed Ann as she left him and came towards the house, she would not have come at all to that fatal conclusion at which, with such momentous and disastrous results, she had then rushed. Useless to conjecture now what would have happened if she had not chanced, or been fated, at a certain moment in her life, and the life of Ann and the life of Coram, to look out of that window. She had looked out of

it and what was done was done. But, as she looked out of it now, she knew suddenly whence at that particular moment Ann and Coram had come. She remembered the day so well and something of oddness in its happenings. Ann and she had driven to Fotheringham. They had been light-hearted and had laughed at the sight of the ridiculous bathers. Ann outwardly had been as light-hearted as she, though inwardly with a reserve which Claudia had been conscious of rather than had perceived. But without apparent reason Ann's light-heartedness had changed into something that was restless and nerve-racked and disturbed and disturbing. When they had reached home she had slipped away. When next Claudia had seen her she was calm, softened, happy. She remembered Ann's face against hers and the "You'll make allowances for me, I know," which had told her so much.

What was this spot to which Ann fled for comfort or solace or help? What was the figure that presided over it?

From wondering to wishing to see was a short step; from wishing to see to determining to see took less time than it took Claudia to put on her hat and coat.

So it came that on the day of Ann's pilgrimage to Handleton, Claudia made a pilgrimage of her own. She found the right entrance to the wood, she found the bridle path, and in time she found the circle. She entered with just the faintest sense of awe. The

place had certainly something which seized upon your imagination, and might even, she could conceive, play tricks with it. The spot had an atmosphere of its own, strange (you could not avoid the word which Ann had used any more than, in the same connection, you could avoid the word 'mysterious'), subtle, perverse, and yet, somehow, of its essence natural, attuned to or in key with Nature herself. Some words that were not written then, nor to be written for another twenty years, would, if she could have known them, have crystallized for her what she felt. The Law of the Jungle reigned in the circle. The circle knew the Law of the Jungle, which was the Law of Nature, and knew no other law. Influences were here that were older than man or man's laws. Claudia, her widow's eyes as round as saucers, understood all that in Ann's story had heretofore puzzled her.

Like Ann she stood before the Waiting Boy.

As she stood there something troubled her — not the boy's beauty, though that troubled her vaguely — a scent, sweet, pricking, passing sweet. She looked about her and saw the sweet-briar, from which, though she did not know this, Coram had once plucked a leaf. The beauty of the boy's pose and poise was troubling, though. It made you want to do homage to it. We know, though Claudia did not, what it had made Ann do. Warm flesh against warmed stone; Ann's face laid for a moment against the chiselled face that had so troubled her. There

were things that you could n't tell — reservations even in Ann's story.

Claudia held some flowers she had gathered as she walked — primroses, the wood was full of them.

Without giving a thought to what she did, but conscious of the need to do homage, she laid them at the boy's feet. The primrose is rather a scentless flower. It was here that the boy must have spoken aloud. Incense was what was demanded; something with a sweet savour. Without knowing that it was he who had spoken or that anything had been spoken, and with no other intention than of supplying this fragrance that seemed to be lacking, Claudia added a leaf or two of sweet-briar to her offering.

What the third day gave her was the appearing of Ann before her with a rapt expression, apprehensive, frightened almost; deadly pale, though she seemed to have been hurrying, and holding in her hand a withered leaf.

"Claudia!"

"Yes, Ann."

"Claudia!"

Ann's voice, thick, hushed, seemed to fail her.

"She knows I've been there," Claudia thought to herself. "What on earth did I put the things there for if I was n't going to tell her? And why did n't I tell her? I knew I was intruding — that's why. And she, she thinks I have been prying —

waiting till her back was turned. Oh, what made me?"

The next moment she was gasping.

"He's come back," Ann was saying. "He's somewhere about."

Claudia flushed to the roots of her hair. But she did not lose her head. She did some very clear thinking. She must tell her, of course. But she hesitated, thinking, thinking. The moment passed when she could have told her. She was committed. She saw that she was committed.

"What do you mean, Ann?"

She was temporizing, but she knew that she was committed.

"I found this. It's his sign to me. He put the same sort of leaf — smell it, Claudia — once before where I found this. It's his sign, his sign." She burst into tears. "And do you know what it means? Yes, in the silly Language of Flowers. There was one, I remembered in the little encyclopædia on my desk and I've looked it up like any foolish servant-girl." She smiled through her tears, wringing Claudia's heart. "I'm as foolish as any servant-girl — not half as wise as one servant-girl, who did know what she wanted. It means — he does n't know — to him it's just something that he knew I should recognize — it means . . . oh, Claudia . . . 'I wound to heal.'"

I wound to heal . . .

That settled it indeed. Claudia was committed to silence and to the purpose which had come of her thinkings. She was going to stake everything on her faith in Coram, now. She was writing to him, knowing that he would understand, and knowing that he would not fail her — or this time fail himself.

"If he's been there he will come again," she said to Ann.

And that — though to keep the iron hot for him till he came, she would not if she had conceived it to be necessary, or expedient, have struck even at repeating his 'sign' for him — was as far as she had ventured in guile.

"You asked me to help you," Claudia wrote. "I am told you are going abroad. If this is so, and if you think there has been any misunderstanding, let me say one word to you before you go. I don't myself know quite what it means. I give it to you for what it is worth, or what it may mean to you, as the clairvoyant or the medium who says, 'I get so-and-so.' What I get is a Statue — yes, and for your guidance, Sundown. Two words I see, as I write them. I repeat I don't know, at least only guess, what one of them means. But if a tangle could be unravelled anywhere, it would be there, at the Statue's feet, and — for your guidance again — it would be there and soon. Oh, at once if at all! You will act on this, or not act upon it, as you wish. It

is all the aid (or indication of how you may aid yourself) that it is in my power to give you."

She did not let Ann out of her sight the next day, nor the next. Ann was restless as a bird kept from the nest. "Let him wait" was what Claudia hoped Ann might suppose her silent persistence to mean. That would be just such wise advice as it would have been conceived that one so wise (as Claudia knew herself to be!) would be likely to have offered if Coram had been, indeed, there to be waiting. Ann got through two days. On the morning of the third, Claudia then having received the answer to her letter, Claudia contrived that Ann should take her to Lower Redmayne to see the alterations. There Ann learnt, as Claudia intended that she should learn, that Coram was going abroad.

After that nothing would have held Ann. But Claudia, her full purpose achieved, when she had with considerable difficulty buttonholed her till lateish in the afternoon, had no further wish to hold her. She allowed herself to be shaken off, or given the slip, and from behind the curtains of the fateful window of the boudoir, she watched Ann start.

CHAPTER VIII

THE years fell from Ann as she entered the wood. The weight of the years that fell from her was in substance the weight of the last two years, but other years fell from her also. She was a girl once more with her life before her. She felt like Christian when the burden has fallen from his back. Nothing had happened, but everything has happened. Everything was as it had been, but everything was changed. Coram stood just where he had stood all along, but Claudia fighting his battle for him had won it, the unhappy Lucy Edget, who was the happy Lucy Tillet, helping. The change was in Ann.

Profound, the change in Ann. Had she, too, undergone that conversion which — though only for what it postulated and perhaps unconsciously implied — had so deeply offended her when she had heard it spoken of by her lover, as applicable, with all that it might stand for, to his own state and case? She saw everything newly. She might, indeed, be said to have been born again. For she wanted to give now, and to ask nothing. Pride no longer mattered. She knew, at last, that, ready as she had supposed herself, she had not been ready at all. She had come to him to receive, not to bestow. She had asked balm for her own wound, seeing only her own wound, ignoring his, and withholding the balm which it had

been in her power to administer. She walked now in a sort of glad humility, wishing truly not to be ministered unto, but to minister.

Once more the wood received her. She heard the cuckoo call. The day was athrob with his note as that other day when she had started out, for what was to prove, though she had not known it then, her Great Adventure. Primroses were everywhere. She paused where they grew thickest, picked her bunch quickly, and continued her way. The spring was moving joyously to summer; she with the spring.

She entered the bridle path. The wood then was piled up each side of her like the waters of the Red Sea — to which Claudia had once likened the cloven flock of sheep through the midst of which the carriage had driven on another day which was memorable. Her path — she knew it! — led, even as the path cleared for the Israelites, to a promised land.

So she walked eagerly, and though she had set out in fear, and though she hurried still as if impelled to haste, she walked without fear. She did not know, as Claudia did know, that she was indeed going to meet her lover. She felt, perhaps, that she was going to meet him, but it was enough for her, since the peace of the wood had descended upon her and lapped her round, that she was going to give the answering sign to that which she believed to be his. Her flowers, with the sprig of sweet-

briar which she should add to them in the circle, would say for her all that was needful. She strained forward. But, under her haste, her peace of mind, the absence of all apprehension, and an upspringing, uplifting, all-pervading sense of security told her that this day for her was to be a day of days. Not years only had dropped from her as she entered the wood.

Claudia had delayed her. The sun was getting low now in the heavens. The tops of the trees were gilded.

The moment came when she could see the Waiting Boy. He looked towards her down the long, narrow avenue. He was waiting as she had so often seen him waiting with the eyes of her body, and as she had so much oftener seen him waiting with the even clearer eyes of her mind. He was waiting for her, whomsoever else he had waited for in the years of all his waiting.

He seemed to her to lean more intently towards her . . .

She reached the circle. On the threshold she paused; her breath held; her hands to her breast. The circle was not empty. Not alone the Waiting Boy who waited. Coram was standing where she had seen him stand when it was only a bird that he held. She knew then that she was indeed to see him, with his son and hers in his arms. As he saw her he opened them now. She stumbled

forward, swaying almost as before, but this time to safety. They closed round her.

Now let the joy-bells ring!

Up the scale, down the scale, rang the fairy bells in the circle. Every bluebell in the wood might have been swinging his head. The circle was aclang with the fairy bells; loud as the bells of St. Clement's and St. Martin's, deep as the big bell of Bow. Nothing was owed any more. The last even of the five farthings paid. Had there been any debt? So the joy-bells rang. But the ringing of joy-bells works up to a clash, and the clash is made up of discords, is, indeed, sweet bells jangled. The clash heard by itself would have a sinister sound to strike terror into the soul. The clash for Coram, came, indeed, as it were, by itself, the deafening, dismaying clash, in the moment when Ann, telling him of his son, lifted perforce the last veil which hid from him the extent of the suffering he had caused her. His punishment, if you demand punishment for him, came then — in full measure, pressed down, running over. If a lifetime may be concentrated into the compass of a few moments as we reckon time, he knew then a lifetime of remorse and contrition and self-abasement. He floundered in deep waters, sinking, drowning. He descended into hell. But Ann was above him, to stretch out her hand to him and, as she had wished, to minister to him.

"It is over," she whispered to him, supporting

him. "I've been able to bear it, and I'm glad now to have borne it. You would have borne your share if you could. What's left to bear — for there's something which nothing can undo — we're going to bear together. That's it, is n't it?"

"Is n't it?" she asked.

He had had a shock which he would need time to recover from. But that was it, and, knowing what she knew, she had no real fear. The bells, brought to silence by their own clash, would ring out once more. Johnny, as far as he could be safe, was safe. Like Lucy she might allow herself to face an unmerited happiness.

He wanted to see his son.

Ann picked up her flowers which lay strewn on the ground where they had dropped from her hand. She laid them at the feet of the statue, adding to them (to his mystification then, but to his subsequent complete understanding) a sprig of sweetbriar.

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THE END

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